Towards Tenderness: Postmodern Empathy in the Novels of Damien Wilkins

---

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfilment

of the requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Arts in English

at the

University of Canterbury

by

Nicholas Wright

University of Canterbury

2000

To my family and friends and, especially Patrick Evans, thank you.

Contents

Abstract		1
Introduction	What We Talk About When We Talk About Tenderness	2
Chapter 1	Exhausted Contexts and The Context of Exhaustion	12
Chapter 2	"The History Lesson": Heurisms, Transgressions and Inculcation	26
Chapter 3	Aphasia, Narcissism and The Postmodern Subject Part I: Aphasia	48
	Part II: Narcissism	59
Chapter 4	"Getting Caught in The Act": Metafiction and the Aesthetics of Empathy	72
Chapter 5	Little Masters Part I: Contingency, Irony and Empathy	92
	Part II: Tenderness	107
Works Consulted		114

Abstract

The following represents an attempt to outline the significance of an author (Damien Wilkins) about whom little or no critical work has, as yet, been written. Primarily the context for this 'outlining' is postmodernism, and what I shall argue is that Wilkins' novels represent a treatment of the postmodern (essentially a process of aestheticisation) whereby the possibility for a social and interpersonal mode of empathetic, meaningful and coherent relation is, in fact, seen as a possibility of postmodernism itself. For myself the possibility of postmodern empathy is something Wilkins invests in his term "tenderness" which, in relation to this context of postmodernism, operates as an abstraction or metaphor for an aesthetics/politics of contingency, irony and affect. In Wilkins' texts this tender aesthetic is examined and foregrounded by what I see as the primary concerns of the fiction, subjectivity, history and language. However, it is language which represents the basis for the sort of empathy Wilkins outlines; just as it is in the structure of language (a polar model proposed by linguist Roman Jakobson) that Wilkins is best able to perform his critique of postmodernism. Essentially it is on the question of language (and the aesthetic) that, as Wilkins seems to argue, claims to social and inter-relational empathy and continuity may be heard. For this reason Wilkins' fiction (and its treatment of postmodernism) connects with a tradition of aesthetics through which something like fiction (in Wilkins case it is more accurate to say metafiction) or art are metaphor for a politics of social engagement, affect and the expression of intimacy and "tenderness". In Wilkins' figure of the 'little master' we find a figure of a certain authority who, because of their abilities with language, is able to 'write' or construct contiguous relationships with others, and with history, within the contingency of the postmodern condition. In Wilkins' fiction it is the characters I refer to as 'little masters' who represent the postmodern empathy Wilkins, as I see it, sets out to record.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Tenderness.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Love is the title of a Raymond Carver short story and I make mention of this because it is the phrase that I returned to continually when reading Wilkins' fiction. Carver's is a phrase that well before I had discovered the use Jerome Klinkowitz makes of it in *Structuring the Void* (1992), I had determined to use either as a chapter heading or title for this thesis. That Klinkowitz had already used the phrase was a little frustrating, but encouraging also since here was someone else who had recognised in that title a correspondence with issues to do with postmodern fiction; someone else, who was, like Damien Wilkins, interested in the processes and possibilities of "talking about [something like] love".

Klinkowitz opens *Structuring the Void* with the following:

> What do we talk about when we talk about love? asks one of contemporary fiction's most revealing titles. Its dilemma in describing the immense amount of activity centering around something that can never be satisfactorily defined reflects a problem common to many other postmodern pursuits.[1]

Klinkowitz's conjecture, and it is one that Wilkins shares, is about the means of "talking about love" given the contingency and post-Saussurean nature of the postmodern condition. Klinkowitz thus asks: "how does fiction speak about a subject when subject matter is said to exist not in itself but only as an absence postulated by differences and exclusions?" (159). This is the central question of Klinkowitz's text and it is well related to the conjecture of Wilkins' novels, which share in the contemporary deconstructive sensibility which teaches that "we are never really talking about things, only the relationship between them - specifically those relations that indicate what the thing is not" (Klinkowitz 1). Indeed, early in Wilkins' second text this postmodern/deconstructive sentiment is mirrored by the character Teresa when she says,

> of course today there really is nothing that's innocent any more, well was there ever. Nothing we say that isn't absolutely loaded, like a gun. Lord you don't have to be in analysis to know that. I mean we're all trained, every one of us is trained from birth

---

[1] *Structuring the Void: The Struggle for Subject in Contemporary American Fiction.* Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1992, p.1.

> basically to hear not what *is* being said, but what is *not* being said, what is *really* being said.[2]

In light of this the very core categories we have assumed to set our "certainties" on have been undermined; ideas or notions like love, or for that matter tenderness, indeed any "subject matter" to which we have invested knowability or coherency, have become undone. This is largely the lesson of postmodernism, its radical contingency and our "incredulous" responses.[3]

Love is one of the 'big words' which portend solidarity, coherency; instant communicability for us. Yet the conditions of this "love" - indeed anything that we might once have assumed to represent coherent subject matter - have changed with the advent of postmodernism. With its reaction against grand or meta-narratives and objective reality postmodernism has seen to it that love has become a radically contingent concept. Such has been the perturbation and disorder[4] of postmodernism that the whole notion of "subject matter" has become an absence; what isn't, can't, and even shouldn't be said. This absence is what Klinkowitz refers to as the "void". What is significant for Klinkowitz, however, are the ways in which we deal with this void. Klinkowitz does not deny the possibility for addressing subject matter - for "talking about love" - only that to do so we must now "structure the void". We must structure the space vacated by "subject matter" in deference to the new conditions of pluralism and contingency. This is the project I think Wilkins also commits to, and for his efforts in "structuring the void" we have his fiction. Both Klinkowitz and Wilkins address the postmodern in attempting to structure empathy and relation or what Wilkins settles on referring to as tenderness. For myself, this tenderness represents a means of coherency, or a way of talking about love within deconstruction and postmodernism.

I began with Klinkowitz since his material gets immediately to the question of communicating something like love or, in Wilkins' case, tenderness at the same time as observing what is ostensibly the premise of postmodernity: contingency. Contingency

---

[2] *Little Masters*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1996, p.10.

[3] "[I]ncredulous" in so far as Lyotard has characterised postmodernism as an "incredulity towards meta-narratives" in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

[4] In describing the action of deconstruction Derrida refers to its ability for "perturbation" and "disorder" in his essay: "Some Statements and Truisms About Neo-Logisms, Newisms, Positivisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms". *The States of Theory*. David Carroll, (ed.) New York, Columbia University Press, 1990, pp.81-94.

undercuts any notions of an objective reality, subject matter or what Klinkowitz refers to as the whole question of being *about*. Contingency teaches us that there is no completion of the world, no know-ability or "final vocabulary" in which the "truth" of anything can be conveyed. Wilkins observes this state of affairs in his novels and yet like Carver, Klinkowitz and theorists like Richard Rorty, Umberto Eco, Patricia Waugh and Brian McHale, manages to use postmodernity (and its own discourses)[5] to come up with an ability to say, talk about, write and share "love", "tenderness" and empathy.

What I recognised in Carver's story and his use of that word *love* is what I see in Wilkins' use of *tenderness*. Moreover, in so far as both terms are used to signify a certain negotiation and cognisance of the complexities of social interaction - affectation, performance, irony, self-consciousness, otherness and difference - then both terms can be seen as instances of empathetic subjectivity.

In Wilkins' fiction, to understand the term "tenderness" and its significance is to attend to what I see as a working (and re-working) of the postmodern sensibility; to attend to a process of aestheticisation - that both novels structure - through which Wilkins' postmodern texts articulate a return to some possibilities of empathy. Moreover, this empathy (and the tenderness that it is represented by) is not a denial of the conditions of the postmodern but is, in fact, a product of those conditions. In short, Wilkins' tenderness signifies a certain postmodern subjectivity capable, despite the contingency of the world, in fact, because of that contingency, of talking once again of something like love.

So my project is to outline the way in which Wilkins and his few notable characters (I refer to them as little masters) are able to "talk about" and mean something like "love" or "tenderness", and how the empathy these novels are built on signifies an aestheticisation of the postmodern condition; an aestheticisation suggestive of prospects of rapprochement and engagement, initially between subjectivities, but also, to the historical contexts of subjectivity, family and society.[6]

---

[5] Moreover, this aestheticising is conducted using terms and theories which themselves belong to postmodernism. Thus I use a theory of language, metafiction and irony (contingency theory) to foreground this 'tender aesthetic'. The point Wilkins seems to be making is one shared by Umberto Eco when he talks about the transhistorical possibility of talking about love in relation to the sort of periodising concepts of which postmodernism is itself an example. Therefore, it is possible to describe empathy in the terms of a postmodernity and contingency which, at the same time, would appear to have made it insensible.

[6] Textually Wilkins' historicity extends back to the periods of romanticism and enlightenment associated with

The assumptions implicit in stating that Wilkins' fiction is postmodern, and that it self-consciously engages constructions of postmodernity in a process of aestheticisation, are assumptions which, in the most basic sense, provide structure to this thesis. What follows then is an observation of the postmodernity evident in Wilkins' fiction. Initially this begins with conjecture into the heurisms and histories that situate Wilkins' postmodernism and shape the conditions of subjectivity and relationship that Wilkins records. More than anything Wilkins' texts are 'about' subjectivity and the way in which the subject relates to the world, to others and to the past.

In relation to the question and construction of postmodernity Wilkins can be seen to argue a "theory of dominance".[7] Postmodernism in Wilkins' fiction, as the given condition, has two faces. The first is the dominant, and is a *weltanschauung* that the majority of characters (almost exclusively adults, particularly the generation still connected [through familial inculcation] to the effects of the Second World War) evince as a wariness and weariness of history; a fear or anxiety about contingency and about selfhood. All of this results in a view of the world and others characterised by exhaustion, fragmentation and chaos analogous to the experiences of schizophrenic, narcissist and aphasic disorders, all of which are triggered initially by a failure of context. In Wilkins' fiction these symptoms represent the dominant (most common) postmodern subjectivity.[8] For such characters postmodernism is experienced as a-historical, dystopic and apocalyptic, and this is an impression of the postmodern that is inculcated by a society

---

the seventeenth century. The "little masters" (etchings), as relics of this period, stand as markers for this sort of historical scope. Wilkins' observation of subjective and familial history are, however, also connected to the history of thought and representation that terms like romanticism, enlightenment, modernism and postmodernism all variously periodise. The principal historical context for Wilkins' fiction is that of the radical disruption of modernist-enlightenment ideology that occurs as a result of the Second World War, and more specifically, as Habermaas and Adorno have suggested, as a result of Auschwitz. This sense of disruption is, in Wilkins' texts, felt as the delegitimisation of self, certainty and stability; an exhaustion of authority and objectivity, or what is also seen as the end of grand narrativity. It is this context of disruption and contingency that Wilkins observes as the postmodern condition, just as it is within this context that Wilkins structures a return to empathetic perception.

[7]See Lodge, David. *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature.* London: Edward Arnold, 1977.

[8]Postmodern literary historians have asserted that postmodernism differs from modernist aesthetics principally in its abandonment of subjectivity. As Edward Smyth points out in *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction.* London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., (1991) "[t]he representation of consciousness is alleged to have been forsaken for emphasis on the fragmentation of the subject. That the self can no longer be considered a unified and stable entity has become axiomatic in the light of poststructuralism" (10). In so far as Wilkins' fiction demonstrates a return to the notion of coherent (and empathetic) subjectivity, then Wilkins' postmodernity is also a little modernist.

(through family). Damned by the contingency of reality, such characters hold out little hope for any form of social or interpersonal engagement and connection.

However, postmodernism in Wilkins' texts, as in any ideological discussion, can be seen to "articulate visions of history in which the evaluation of the social moment in which we live today is the object of an essentially political affirmation or repudiation".[9] As such, characters define themselves in the postmodern world Wilkins records either through a repudiation of the past or a re-connection with it. Commensurate with this position is the relationship subjects hold in relation to contingency; they are either "damned" by it through an incapacity to generate context through a referencing of the past, or made 'masterful'[10] by it through the generation of context and meaning articulated by a playing off of the "old and the new" (Rorty), the familiar and unfamiliar. This latter perception and construction of the postmodern is imbued by Wilkins in the few 'masterful' figures of his fiction.

In relation to his construction of postmodern subjectivity Wilkins can be seen to offer a theory of dominance. This is something that is made analogous by his depiction of the language disorder aphasia, and its correlation to a typology of literature as outlined by David Lodge.[11] Thus, the expression of the dominant postmodern subjectivity is found in the depiction of the aphasic, the figure who, being "context deficient", cannot construct metonymic chains of thought; cannot build contiguity and, as a result, experiences the

---

[9]See Jameson, Fredric. "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodern Debate" in *New German Critique*. #33, Fall 1984, University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee. pp.53-65.

[10]"Mastery" as I discuss it in the final chapter is only meant to signify an engagement with contingency and an ability for attenuative practice; hence it is 'little masters' that we talk about.

[11]The observance of the aphasic subjectivity by Wilkins is especially apt since, as Patricia Waugh says in *Practising Postmodernism/Reading Modernism* (1992), "postmodernism represents the dissolution of the self into language" (64). As Lodge points out in *The Modes of Modern Writing*, aphasia (and the language model) offers a way of understanding typological dominance in literary modes. Lodge charts the axis of language from metaphor to metonym (as Lodge points out, these are the only places language can go) and shows how modes of literature are felt as such (different from other modes) because of the relative dominance of either of the poles of language (metaphor or metonymy). When the poles are in a state of imbalance aphasia occurs. In the characters of Wilkins' fiction who are aphasic - context deficient (unable to use the metonymic pole of language properly) - Wilkins has an image of the kind of postmodernism which is characterised by over compensation to the metaphoric pole. In Wilkins' texts the aphasic postmodern is represented as the prevailing and dominant condition. In the figure of Healey we have an instance of an author (and a literature) transcending this aphasia to the point where metonymy and contiguity (the basis of the empathetic/tender aesthetic) are able to be structured. Thus, in the figures I refer to as 'little masters' Wilkins' is embodying a 'postmodernism' that, in so far as it is able to use both metaphor and metonym, at once offers both disorder and coherency. This is a postmodern fiction that evinces an ability to mix and choose freely in the negotiation of a position that I will later refer to as "metastable".

world purely on a metaphorical basis characterised by fragmentation, substitution and likeness (in many ways like the "schizophrenic" experience of language both Lacan and Jameson describe). It is the aphasic who represents the embodiment of the dominant mode of the postmodern sensibility in Wilkins' fiction. However, the success of Wilkins' fiction is not built on the observance of this situation but rather on the returning of contiguity and connection to the postmodern. What such a 'return' signifies is a healing of a particular aphasia and a demonstration of some possibilities drawn from conditions of contingency.

The last chapters of the thesis deal more specifically with the condition and significance of tenderness and empathy, in particular how they represent this aestheticisation of the postmodern. Where the first chapters seek to attend to the prevailing conditions of Wilkins' postmodern world, the second half of the thesis sets out to outline the processes or 'mechanics' involved in Wilkins' construction of a postmodern empathy. Thus, these chapters deal primarily with theories of metafiction and contingency in combination with the notion of "getting caught in the act" that Wilkins articulates in his essay on writing, "Opening the Bag".

Wilkins' postmodernism; his aesthetic, is tied to this notion of "getting caught", and tenderness, for all the coherency and connection I take it to represent, depends on a certain vulnerability inherent in that word itself. Tenderness, then, is what is perceived by the exposure of something normally covered or protected. Tenderness is where we are brought in whatever manner to the consideration and acknowledgment of the choices and roles, affectations and constructions we have employed in the knowledge that they are in fact artefacts, but artefacts which turn out to be the means by which we may "[tie] ourselves up with other human beings".[12] Tenderness and the coherency that it represents does not, then, depend on the right information, or truths, but on the everyday little human efforts, or what Wilkins calls "good readings" ("O.T.B." 71).

Early on in *Little Masters* there is a passage where, in effect, these 'everyday little human efforts' are set out as the point of conjecture that both novels undertake. Notably, the passage turns on the consideration of contingency. In so far as both of Wilkins' texts

---

[12]See Richard Rorty, in "The Contingency of Selfhood" from *Contingency, Irony and, Solidarity*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p.41.

are primarily about relationships, then what follows can easily be overlaid on both novels. Thus, we find Adrian thinking about his relationship with his new son:

> Adrian is confused, not by the child as a moral weight, nor by the signals of what lies ahead, though all that seems difficult enough. He is lost by a glance he might catch, a soundless motion of the brow, a particular way of walking different from yesterday's. It is not the future he wants to predict, it is the present. It is each unthinkable moment between them, the meaning of an hour's worth of gestures, the almost unmanageable accumulation of a day's worth of the everyday (32).

This is a statement about the radical contingency of meaning and interpretation in the world; even in a "moment" is contained the "unthinkable"; and so, not surprisingly, Wilkins' texts do not address (outright) the large questions, and they do not purport to answer anything on any grander scale than that of the everyday small moments. Fittingly, Wilkins' postmodern aesthetic of empathy is based on the observance of moments of attenuation.[13] The process of getting to know a stranger (depicted in the relationship of Daniel and Adrian) is parabolic of the thematics of Wilkins' fiction seen as an exploration of relation and otherness (in the contingency we live within) and the possibility of structuring coherent, affective and effective bonds (that as Rorty suggests may describe a form of contingent solidarity) through the establishment of context. The meta-context for Wilkins' fiction is empathy, though it is manifest as "tenderness" in the first novel (and in this thesis) as "gentleness" (briefly) in *Little Masters* and as "touching" in "Opening the Bag".

Tenderness, it seems, has much to do with the "good readings" Wilkins describes in "Opening the Bag". For Wilkins these 'readings' are metaphor for effective and tender interaction and relation. A "good reading", as Wilkins says, is a "revisionist reading [which] takes us back - sometimes uncomfortably, even painfully, occasionally with marvellous accuracy - to the founding interrogatives on which we have set our

---

[13]It is this point about attenuation that lies as the "hope" Teresa (in *Little Masters*) proffers for the "little facts", and indeed it is only on the logic of attenuation (little facts) that tenderness and empathy can remain a postmodern hope without becoming meta-narratives in their own right. Here we see the importance of the metonymy that aphasics cannot perceive and that the 'little master' uses to construct 'contingent solidarity'. Wilkins, like Brian McHale in *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), is thus offering an endorsement of the provisional and "minor narratives" (6). Thus, Wilkins' project is not a denial of narrative form, as narrativity of some degree is, as McHale suggests, "inevitable". However, in order "[t]o escape the general incredulity towards metanarratives it is only necessary that we regard our own metanarratives incredulously, in a certain sense, proffering it tentatively or provisionally, as no more (but no less) than a strategically useful and satisfying fiction" (24). What Wilkins is offering in his aestheticisation of the postmodern condition is fiction itself. To this extent, Wilkins' postmodernism is coloured by a modernist impulse that ends up proffering art (and its embrace with contingency) as a response to the collapse of the grand narratives.

certainties" (70). Here, in this statement, we observe what is true of Wilkins' tender aesthetic that is built on a conjecture to the past, a re-working and, in some cases, a re-imagining of our histories which, in relation to the present, we revise. In the process of this revision we produce contexture, new connections; contiguities. The "remarkable intimacy" that the essay finishes with pairs this sort of ironic/historic questioning with the theme of empathy (in this way this essay is truly preparing the ground for Wilkins' fiction) that the novels also finish with.

A "good reading" is then both ironic and historic. Be it in relation to another person or some object of knowledge such a reading revises our own position, our "vocabulary" or the ways in which we relate and structure through our subjective preferences. Such a reading is ironic in that it performs a questioning of our certainties. The "revision" is done in a referencing of our personal histories; our fictions, narratives, metaphors, playing the "old off against the new" (Rorty), foregrounding and backgrounding; placing different elements - be they people or information - in the context of other elements. This is not done so as to discover truths or essences, but rather to construct partial joins; affinities and differences and what we can also think of as the attenuated (contingent) narratives that Brian McHale talks about.[14]

"Good reading[s]", indeed "revisionist reading[s]", such as Wilkins discusses in his essay, are what set Richard Rorty's "ironist" figures apart from others. These ironist figures, like Wilkins' 'little masters', all share an aptitude for 'authority'; they are sufficiently good readers and writers that they adopt in 'life', as in the fiction, authorial positions. These characters exert a kind of control and faculty for connection (or tenderness), through their seemingly natural comprehension of contingent, ironic, self-conscious and attenuated practices. As authorial figures they have the imagination to structure and attend to the aestheticising practice that Wilkins himself records in his texts. In my argument these characters are not only good author figures, they are, more

---

[14]On this point about contingency we can find an analogue of Wilkins' fiction in the writing of Alice Munro, and in particular, the way in which, like Wilkins', her fiction calls attention to itself as fiction in a similarly metafictional manner. Like Wilkins', this effort is not designed to "underscore disruption or narrative excess, but to note the narrative strategies - the conditions and contingencies - that allow the pieces to come together" (11). From Mark Nunes, "'Postmodern Piecing': Alice Munro's Contingent Ontologies" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol 34, #1, Winter 1997, Newberry College, South Carolina. pp.11-26. Furthermore Rorty appears to endorse McHale's views on contingency in relation to the postmodern when he writes that "[s]olidarity has to be constructed out of the little pieces, rather than found already waiting, in the form of an ur-language which all of us recognize when we hear it" (94).

particularly, good postmodern/metafictional author figures. Such characters all share in an aesthetic which, I am suggesting, demonstrates for Wilkins the tender and empathetic possibilities of postmodernism. For Rorty, these empathetic possibilities signify a possibly coherent view of the world built upon contingency and irony.

From Richard Rorty's the "Contingency of Selfhood" (1989) the ironic practice described can be read as the 'mechanics' of Wilkins' tender aesthetic, and in many ways it is the action of Rorty's ironist which corresponds to the form of coherency and connection that Wilkins seems to be proffering. (Irony is, it seems, a core concern for intimacy in this aesthetic.) With Rorty we see the continuation of the notion so present in Wilkins' fiction, that we exist first and foremost in language and that as a consequence of this, reality or truth are themselves constructions, artefacts and fictions we make in language. This sense of language (and the "dissolution of self") is something that I pursue in the chapter on Aphasia. The ironist I discuss in my final chapter is a model that the characters in Wilkins' fiction, whom I refer to as 'little masters', are based on.

It is Patricia Waugh, however, writing about Rorty's contingency theory, who most clearly outlines Wilkins' treatment of postmodernity and the project of his fiction when she writes about the "hope" of postmodernism. In effect Waugh provides the historical (literary) context, as well as the tradition of aesthetics that Wilkins seems to be placing his fiction within. Thus, Waugh writes that the hope of Rorty's postmodernism is that the

> modes of irony and contingency may come to provide the possibility for imaginative expansion of human sympathy and empathy as a basis for that social and political solidarity, no longer available in the philosophical, historical or religious grand narratives of the past. Though 'postmodern' in its emphasis on irony and contingency and in its critique of analytic philosophy, Rorty's vision of the aesthetic as a basis for a new social consensus is, however, hardly a radical departure from a firmly established tradition of Western *aesthetics* running from the work of Schelling through Arnold to cultural pessimists from Theodor Adorno to T.S. Eliot.[15]

If we take contingency to be the "defining feature" of the postmodern world, then we can say that irony is one of the defining features of our responses to that world. In Wilkins' fiction it is through an ironic working of contingency that something like "tenderness" and what it represents (empathy, intersubjective engagement, coherency within contingency) is brought forth from the postmodern.

---

[15]See *Practising Postmodernism/Reading Modernism.* Edward Arnold, Great Britain, 1992. p.12.

If we were here to make some summary of this tenderness then we might say that in the fiction of Damien Wilkins, love, or as is the case, "tenderness", consists of this: that individuals are aware of a certain instability in their language practices and that individuality, or what is called subjectivity, consists of our power to describe and represent; that individuals acknowledge that being-in-the-world is also a condition of being-in-language and is therefore a contingency built upon the qualities of their own individuality; and that people still find ways of structuring empathetic relations through the mutual and ironic acknowledgment of these very contingencies.

All of what follows is, then, 'about' the meaning of this word "tenderness"; what it signifies in relation to Wilkins' postmodern fiction, or (in an attempt to avoid "false innocence") as Raymond Carver would say, what we talk about when we talk about tenderness.

Exhausted Contexts and the Context of Exhaustion.

Given that contingency is the defining feature of Wilkins' postmodernism, one of the strong, indeed, dominant reactions to this 'new' sense of contingency is exhaustion. Exhaustion is the term that describes what Wilkins observes as the dominating mode of his postmodernism (and its contingent basis). In the fiction this 'mode' is manifested as a lack of affect, a sense of a-historic subjectivity, and the loss of a sense of self. These symptoms are expressed through the disorders I shall later observe of narcissism and aphasia, but are themselves also effects of the inculcation of this exhaustion and the acts of transgression they are associated with. The exhaustion of the emotional, interpersonal and social is thus what characterises the mode of postmodernity that Wilkins observes as the dominant relationship between the subject and the contingent world.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide some backgrounding for the chapters ("The History Lesson" and "Aphasia, Narcissism and the Postmodern Subject") that follow. As such, this chapter sets out to establish a context for my discussion of the dominant mode of postmodern subjectivity present in Wilkins' fiction. What we shall see is that this context of exhaustion introduces the prevailing 'symptoms' of an observed postmodern climate. But the point of outlining such symptoms and context in this chapter is also to make familiar the conditions of exhaustion and contingency that, in Wilkins' fiction, are consistent also with the emergence of empathy and tenderness. More immediately, however, what is evident is that this context of exhaustion is predicated primarily on an exhaustion of the contexts of history, relationship and self. As such, exhaustion in Wilkins' texts is felt not only as the 'sense of an ending'[1] consequent to the experiences of the Second World War, but also the exhaustion felt by post war generations in the void of the grand narratives of the past. It is the fading away of grand narrative authority that is signified by the 'lightening' (24) of the grandfather in his casket.[2]

---

[1]The 'sense of an ending' (the exhaustion of history) is the cultural moment that Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978) equates with the rise of a narcissistic society.

[2]This 'lightening' of the grandfather is suggestive of the leavening of paternal authority as much as it is grand-narrativity, though the grandfather (essentially an autocrat associated in the text with a kind of omnipotence) has been, for the family, a controlling presence in their lives. With his death the 'fixity' of the world as his family experience it is replaced with contingency, and this new fluidity is experienced also in language as a kind of slippage. Thus, as Healey notes, "coffin" becomes "casket" and "laughter [doesn't] mean the same thing any more" (24).

However, if we locate this exhaustion as an effect of something as disruptive as warfare, then we must also associate it with a 'progenitor' generation (the grandfather in *The Miserables* is the principal figure here and in *Little Masters* it is parents, especially uncles and fathers, who belong to this 'generation'), who, having experienced such radical transgression and disruption, have translated it through their families. In Wilkins' fiction this process of translation (what Teresa refers to as "inculcation" [22]) is manifested variously as emotional and inter-personal detachment, but also (as *Little Masters* appears to record) acts of physical transgression. Essentially, it is the sudden exposure to contingency (located as the effects of war) that results in a particular generation's experience of radical doubt and uncertainty about selfhood, behaviour, relation and expression. It is this form of 'fearful' contingency manifested, as I have said, as a profound form of exhaustion that becomes inculcated through family.

The characters who are primarily the subject of Wilkins' fiction, the young adults or "border hoppers" (*L.M.*, 21) such as Healey, Adrian and Emily; Teresa, Catherine and David, all to some extent represent the legacy of the emotional and inter-subjective exhaustion established by this progenitor generation. Few in the succeeding generations are confident about regaining their autonomy. Few, it seems, are confident about recovering depth of feeling and the capacity for empathy. Healey senses this in those gathered around him at the funeral and recognises it as a "test" of this quality of exhaustion. Healey thus notes:

> Both triumph and depletion in the muscles, as if there had been a tapping of the reserves, reserves which everyone hoped they had but no one knew for certain whether they did or not until this moment, until the reserves were called upon. A test. Yet even now who could be sure they hadn't come through on nothing but bluff, he thought; that really there were no reserves, and that somehow, collectively, they had all cheated with this mourning. And that this was the point of funerals, or of any ritual -- you got by on form alone (26).

What we shall see in the following discussion is that the notion of emptiness - the lack or doubt about 'inner-reserves' - is characteristic of the exhausted generation Wilkins records. Moreover, in the portrait of the society Wilkins commits to his texts it is "form alone" (26) which governs interaction, both personal and social. We shall see that this society has become increasingly ritualised and mannered and in the process, has suffered a decathexis of emotional depth and investment. In the absence generated by this decathectic drive, rituals of consumption and profession have replaced the now seemingly non-viable notions of emotional and empathic relation. The point here is that

this death, this figuring of exhaustion, is quite notably the beginning from which Wilkins' second text continues. It is this sense of exhaustion that ushers in the postmodern and the post-romantic sensibility of a society, in this instance, freshly shorn of the previous grand narratives of authority and paternity. In simple terms Wilkins begins with the exhaustion of old certainties and the radical contingency of the world.

Little Masters opens with a psychoanalytical session: an inquiry into the sort of subjectivity characterised by the sense of inner emptiness and emotional exhaustion. In effect what this prologue explores is a condensation of what both texts commit to in their entirety: conjecture as to the conditions and possibilities of selfhood and subjectivity within the landscape of the exhausted. Importantly, this prologue also introduces Teresa Rosner, a character who very quickly becomes a sort of spokesperson for the exhausted, solipsistic generation Wilkins depicts.

Teresa is consumed by the "impedimenta" of successive generations of her family. These impedimenta take the form of a narrative history of detention, dispossession and immigration which recur to Teresa in the form of "nightmares". She is, as she says, a "conduit" (19) for the experiences of her Polish predecessors. In short, Teresa is in thrall to over fifty years of collective familial trauma situated as the effects of World War Two; specifically, the incarceration of her family in Russian gulags as well as the trauma of their enforced emigration. Although too young to have lived these experiences, Teresa suffers them as an impediment to the sense of her own autonomy and control. She is unable to develop her own subjectivity, so smothered is she by this narrative inheritance. As one character later says of Teresa, "she was *told too much as a kid.* It screwed her up, [...] always hearing about this stuff, the war, the old country"(*L.M.*,52). Teresa's nightmare dominates her sense of self to the point of usurping her own memory and subjectivity, as she has no control over this "nightmare" - it is not "memory", as Teresa says, so much as "tyranny"(19).

In her session with her therapist Teresa describes something of the exhaustion she feels when she is asked about the period following her "nightmare". Her response not only describes her impressions on waking, but suggests also the quality of the contemporary condition Wilkins pits the majority of his characters against. On Robert's prompting, Teresa confesses,

> I feel useless, a nothing. The nightmare is bad enough but this period afterwards is almost worse. I have nothing left, that is what it feels like, as though I've been robbed. I don't even have my nightmare. It's over. As though I've just been made unemployed (18).

The "nightmare", as it is connected to her family's experience of the war, is associated with grand narratives. The "period afterwards" is that of the contemporary condition where the absence of meta-narrative is felt as "almost worse"; only exhaustion remains: the experience of being a "nothing", "unemployed"; "robbed" of the materials and contexts of selfhood. Exhaustion is, then, this sense of 'nothingness' or absence, present to Teresa as the lack of her own private self: her subjectivity. It is for this reason that earlier she describes herself as simply a "conduit" (19).

However, the most explicit expression of 'inner emptiness' or exhaustion in *Little Masters* comes in the form of one of Jilly's "pseudo confessions". In effect, Jilly here expands on what Teresa refers to as the experience of living as a "conduit". Jilly's disclosure is prefaced by a discussion with Adrian about Tim and the qualities that lie "underneath" our exteriors. "Oh but at least you have an exterior", says Jilly,

> [s]pare a thought for those of us who live, like great fat mosquitoes, on the surface of the pond. We're the first to go, aren't we. A few bites and we're finished. I literally dream of interior wealth and complexity, of deep things beating within me, secret buried riches that no one knows about. If I had a fantasy life that would be it--adding dimensions to myself, swimming in those murky, lovely underground waters. [...] But everyone does know about me, to the nth degree. I'm utterly available, accessible, immediate. This is it. Pinch me, I'll scream, but nothing inside will reverberate. I dream of reverberations. I end shortly after I begin (356).

Like the others of the group I include as a 'generation'[3], interiority, complexity and depth in selfhood are envisioned in literally "murky" terms. There is an irony here as although

---

[3] When I say "generation" I am referring to the group of characters in Wilkins' fiction who are recognisable for their experience and display of exhaustion. This generation includes any such characters as those who have suffered an interruption (and in some cases a suspension) of childhood through the absence or transgression or emotional withdrawal of a parenting generation. Wilkins points heuristically to the experience of a world at war as a possible source for such parenting, and indeed, the texts begin chronologically with the sense of interruption provided by the First World War in France. The grandfather, we note, a progenitor figure for both texts, is witness to this. *Little Masters* continues this tradition with a chronology beginning with the memory (Con's) of the bombing of Poland and of Russian gulags. What we can say is that knowledge of interruption, transgression and exhaustion (what I refer to as contingency) as experienced by a progenitor generation has been transmuted, or "parrot[ed]" (*L.M.*, 115) through succeeding "conduit" (*L.M.*, 19) generations. This seems to be the paradigm of exhaustion Wilkins proffers and is the shaping impedimenta that lies at the core of the postmodern subjectivity that Wilkins is concerned with. All of this is to say that the generation I am concerned with discussing here is not only confined to a certain age bracket, but is a generation established on the grounds of a parental tradition. As such Tim and

Jilly desires the "murky" depths, this 'murkiness' (apart from its obvious connotations of concealment and an inability for insight) is also the uncertainty Jilly and her contemporaries are troubled by. It is this 'murkiness' which cossets doubt and clouds the apprehension of a determinable identity and selfhood. Uncertainty governs the view of the complex self and what is left is a superficial existence: life on the "surface" where for Jilly there is no more depth beyond her pinched skin.

Exhaustion is experienced as inner emptiness: the feeling that at the core level of existence there is nothing but a blank. Everywhere in these texts characters are set in relation to the world - to others and to themselves - by this quality of exhaustion. When David agrees to be a model for a colonic irrigation it is the condition of this exhaustion as much as the state of David's 'inner health' that is explored. In a way David becomes a sort of test case for his impeded generation and for 'postmodern subjectivity', as he is to be photographed for the alternative health section of a book Tim is publishing. The combination of the sodomitic inference (the colonic irrigation) with the notion of 'well being' is a useful conflation, suggestive of the level of introversion and narcissism of a society based on the reproduction of systems and instances of "self-inquiry" and "transcendental self-attention".[4] David's irrigation is for this reason metaphorically a conjecture into the condition of his "inner-self" or subjectivity, and the irrigation is a parodic form of the sort of "self-inquiry" Teresa engages in with her therapist. Both Teresa and David[5] are testing the depths and conditions of the impedimenta that dominate their lives. Where Teresa describes herself as a "conduit", David is perhaps more properly recognisable as a 'vessel' for such material.

"Impedimenta" is then what we read in Shirley's phrase about the effects of the irrigation or, what she refers to as a freeing up of "a lot of foreign matter" (303). Here we can substitute "foreign matter" for the forms of impedimenta that characters like David and Teresa suffer from but are not originally responsible for. However, if David has been cleansed or freed of the foreign matter of his inner self then he is all the more passive for

---

Jilly, who are themselves parents (like Healey's parents and his aunts), should be discussed alongside Healey, Adrian and Emily as well as the fourteen year old attendant of the "Gravitron" in *Little Masters*.

[4]Jim Hougan (see *Decadence: Radical Nostalgia, Narcissism, and Decline in the Seventies*. New York: Morrow, 1975 quoted in Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism*, p.6) in effect describes the contemporary condition of exhaustion Wilkins also observes where characters "fix" their nervous gaze on the project of the "inner self" and, in the process, forsake engagement with the world and the perception of others.

[5]David's impedimenta takes the form of what Adrian at one point refers to as a "nasty divorce" (*L.M.*, 153). The effect of this "nasty divorce" is the basis for the "foreign matter" that David's sense of self is built on.

it. In his case, the "tapping of the reserves" (*T.M.*, 26)[6] has revealed an absence and inanition radical enough to induce stupor and narcosis; in fact, David seems to suffer a kind of stroke as a result of the irrigation. David, it seems, has nothing left once he has been cleansed of his impedimenta and later, after returning to the squat, he appears to age rapidly, experiencing a "tingling" which he soon reports to have "grown out of" before averring to feel "a hundred" (311). David loses muscular control as well as a sense of balance and orientation. Adrian has to guide him to the couch which David no longer seems able to see before he finally loses consciousness. This moment of sleep is like that of a death brought on by the complete exhaustion of a body now emptied of its inner material, and the implication here is that for characters like Teresa and David, their impedimenta is all they have; in short, there has not been the development of reserves of self and subjectivity beyond this.

But if exhaustion is a way of describing the subjectivity (or experience of self) of the individual in Wilkins' postmodernism, then exhaustion also describes the condition of inter-relation these subjectivities conduct between one and another. This is something we observe in Healey, once again, at the funeral of his grandfather in *The Miserables*, thinking about the experience of embracing his relations. These are moments thoroughly mitigated by Healey's solipsism as he is left considering not the sensation of the embrace or the 'person embraced', but rather, "what he would say about the embrace after it had happened and how the embrace should be reported" (27). Even in these moments of physical interaction Healey is alone. What we shall see is that this sort of reaction is entirely consistent with the sort of emotional and cognitive disengagement present throughout both of Wilkins' texts. The point here is that where exhaustion as previously mentioned is a condition of the absence (or felt absence) of an inner self, then exhaustion is also an effect of this doubt about selfhood. These individuals struggle to feel anything in relation to those around them; it is emotion and feeling and the possibility of empathy that are exhausted.[7]

---

[6]The pun here on "tapping" (associated with the aspect of "irrigation") is, I think, on Wilkins' part, unintentional but nevertheless is consistent with the notion of introversion and "self-inquiry" for the reason that David's irrigation remembers Healey's phrase about those gathered at the grandfather's funeral experiencing a "tapping of the reserves" (T.M., 26).

[7] If we return to Healey at the interment we see this uncertainty as it is manifested in a lack of feeling. Considering his phrase "form alone" Healey recognises that this is a phrase that "had come to him in moments of unusual pressure"(27). In the moment of the embrace, and Healey's reportage of it, what is present is a type of confusion, an uncertainty sufficient to see that intimacy is mistaken; empathy and tenderness are missed. A moment of seemingly certain pathos (the funeral) is left empty but for its reportage. All that remains is language and so it is only this phrase: "unusual pressure" that remains of the embraces.

Again, it is Teresa who expresses this exhaustion as occurring at the "level of feeling".[8] Here also we note that Teresa associates this exhaustion with the effect of impedimenta.

> Look at this--I'm dry eyed. I'm dry eyed! I've become bored with my own nightmare. All those details, my dear father's gift to me--it's become like modern opera, hasn't it--the only thing of interest left is the technique. No feeling. [...] God, now I don't know what I prefer--to be overcome or to be under-come, [...] is it finally a sign of health do be so unaffected? (18).

"Unaffected" is, then, perhaps the best way to describe the generation that Teresa is representative of in Wilkins' fiction. Exhaustion here is felt as the sense of "no feeling", and this is something generated by an uncertainty about the "reserves" and depth of self.

Exhaustion appears in the confused, odd and, at times, inappropriate ways in which individuals react to and experience intimacy and emotion. Healey confesses as much when he thinks about the "laugh" which "had always issued from him whenever he had been forced to experience any deep emotion" (98). What is revealed by such a reaction is a discomfort with the self; what the self feels and a mistrust of those emotions. This is something exacerbated by a society in which feeling itself is treated with uncertainty and scepticism. Such is the exhaustion of feeling that the language of feeling (like the prospect of "talking about love" that I began with) is something that now has expression through the discourse of salesmen and professionals, doctors and lawyers. As Teresa's analyst points out, the language of feeling has been "hijacked" (*L.M.*,15), and what is left

---

"[U]nusual pressure" also recalls an anxious response to the prospect of having to feel. Either way, the phrase ("unusual pressure"), whether it signifies anything as palpable as an embrace or merely discomfort, represents the level of mitigation Healey, like his contemporaries in both Wilkins novels, constructs and experiences in relation to intimacy. It is intimacy and empathy, like any form of mutual engagement, that the characters of Healey's generation are confused about, and again, this confusion is a consequence of exhaustion: uncertainty about those "reserves", anxiety about the self.

[8]In reviewing a novel by Graham Greene, Donald Barthelme wrote of the "tiredness" of Greene's novel noting that all that remained was "manner". For Barthelme, this was an example of what he referred to as "exhaustion at the deepest level, at the level of feeling". Barthelme's critique was directed at the author and it is not a critique we could direct at Wilkins though it is an accurate description of the world and characters Wilkins portrays; a world where characters get by on "form alone", where others displace emotional investment and engagement with "bluff" and where "ritual" has become a surrogate to feeling. See "Literary Disruptions; or, What Has Become of American Fiction?" by Jerome Klinkowitz in Raymond Federman (ed.) *Surfiction, Fiction Now and Tomorrow.* The Swallow Press Inc., Chicago, 1975. p.165.

is a pastiche[9] of the personal and the intimate, a language of emotion melded with that of commerce and consumption. Emotive language is now, it seems, little more than another consumable and, in effect, this is a language which trades on its own materiality. It is purely "form alone" (*T.M.*, 26), and represents the state of a society that makes few demands on anything other than the spectacle of surface. Even the pathos associated with the death of a family member is, on Healey's evidence, governed by "form" and "ritual", and the consequence for subjectivity is that there is very little call for "inner reserves" or psychic depth. What is evident is that the manner and forms of a consumer based logic have been carried over into the realm of inter-subjective exchange, intimacy and personal relations. The purveyors of this new currency of the personal are the class of professionals; lawyers, doctors and salespeople, a group about whom Teresa speaks when she says, "all they have is manner" (*L.M.*,26).

The social worker who examines Daniel seems remarkable for his assimilation of a pseudo-poetic language of concern; trading on the images of cliched travel metaphors: "You had to go a long way out to come a long way home" (46). As Adrian notes, "the sessions would always come around to such images; walking down roads, crossing bridges, reading signposts" (46), and it is this repetition that is consumed - the cliches offer "form alone" as they are divested of any original content, and, while these images affect Adrian and Daniel, there is no enhancement of empathy in these sessions, only the "manner" of a social worker reproducing the image and form of his profession. For this reason the social worker's effort is one of introversion or "transcendental self attention": in this case the forms of his 'profession' have transcended engagement with the patient.[10]

We compare the social worker's analysis of Daniel with Robert's analysis of Teresa's dreams and, here again, what the analyst comes up with seems like so much tired and recycled material. Even Teresa baulks at the banality of Robert's readings but, as he

---

[9]The occurrence of pastiche or what Fredric Jameson (see "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in Foster, Hal. (ed.) *The Anti Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. (1st ed.) Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983. p.114) refers to as "mask wearing" and "speech in a dead language" is indicative of a society in which content has given way to form. Moreover, pastiche is a sign that the discourse of a society has suffered a removal from any sense of context or the adherence to a referent which the object of pastiche might refer. As such pastiche is a non-ironic form, and in Wilkins' fiction is a symptom of a more general exhaustion of notions of content and inner selves. Pastiche represents a 'false' nostalgia that despite its appearance does not establish a connection to any past (historical) context.

[10]*Social Worker*, we should note, as a title, captures the conflation of both the professional realm and the social, and as such this social worker is not so different from the doctors, lawyers and salesmen portrayed in both texts who represent the hijacking of the personal.

points out, it is her "material" after all. The implication here is one of a crucial decathexis of the emotional inner-self. The banality and common nature of the analysis suggests an evaporation of psychic depth and individuality, an exhaustion of the possibilities of self, most especially their expression. The word "material" itself is enough to suggest that Teresa's subjectivity is little more than a farrago of tired concepts and pre-consumed notions. But this seems to be very much the currency of the psychic landscape Wilkins depicts, a 'currency' arbited by 'professionals'.

We note in the everyday exchange of people the prevalence of this 'consumer talk'; quite apart from the therapists and doctors, lawyers and salesmen, it is a feature of the everyday. Thus Adrian's mother scolds his father for his quite genuine frustration with a customer, telling him about "goodwill" and how "it was something you built up like an investment" (40). When intimacy seems a threat to the otherwise uncomfortable parting of Adrian and his father Stan, Adrian views the hand he thinks his father looks capable of pushing out in preference to an embrace. For Adrian his father's handshake would be like an "offer of a firm shake as if on some dubious business deal, a job lot of cheap lino or a hundred feet of slightly damaged piping" (40). That Adrian should think this at such a moment says much about the uncertainty involved in the exchange of intimacy and those details; the "damaged piping", the "cheap lino", apart from illustrating the incursion of the commercial realm into the personal, are also testament to the conflation of an economic and emotional parsimony.[11]

The Miserables offers similar evidence of this sort of conflation of the personal and the intimate with the commercial and the professional. The word "scheme", for example, is invested with something of a pejorative sense in both novels. Just as Healey thinks of his erratic father's house swap "scheme", we remember also the use the American makes of the word in relation to his "insurance scheme"(40).[12] The American himself is in pursuit of a radical self-re-invention and he phrases his "proposition" to Healey in the

---

[11] A similar conflation is observed when Teresa travels to the location of the refugee camp at Pahiatua. In effect, she is travelling to the symbolic centre of her existential self; to the site of her dreams, the interior of her imaginative life, albeit an imaginative life set to the impedimenta of her parents. But what Teresa finds is nothing so existential as "blankness" or "absence" but rather the substitution of her dream-landscape for a business: "a working place"(13). The image here is quite apparently demonstrative of the incursion of the commercial realm into the psychic and as such we remember Teresa's phrase from earlier in her session where she refers to her attempt at apprehending her subjectivity as "this whole *business* of self-inquiry and analysis"[my italics](8).

[12] We remember also the anger and sense of affrontery with which Stefan reacts to David's use of the word "scheme". For Stefan the word implies something venal or underhand (345).

language of a "business venture". The image of the American that comes to Healey at this point is that of an "accountant searching for the layman's language to explain to a client a column of disagreeable figures" (38), not, as we might reasonably expect, of a desperate, love-lorn, tragic figure.

When Healey listens to the discussion of his deceased grandfather by his aunts we note again a familiar term evoked in explanation of the grandfather's absence in relation to his family. "[H]e was always away on business" (35) one of the aunts says, and this phrase, that term "business", is made almost euphemistic by the following qualification that, "Some of it was that [...] But a lot of it ... well, he just loved to be away" (35). "Business" is here something of a synonym for general detachment, distance or withdrawal. Parenting, it seems, has appropriated elements of the consumer world. Healey's father is noted for his belief in the "public spectacle" (*T.M.*, 89) of fatherhood while Healey's mother maintains her distance from her young family and her husband's "schemes" while on holiday by reading. She approaches her reading as though approaching an onerous task and it is this 'business' of reading that keeps her from the company of her family. Healey remembers that his mother "would often complain of having four or five [books] on the go at one time and refer to them in exasperation as though they had chosen her from all the other library users, forcing themselves into her life and swallowing all her spare time" (89).

This point about reading seems an important one to make since Healey, as an adult, makes his business the business of reading and conducts much of his life as though behind the cover of an opened book, disengaged and "detached" by the mediation of this other attention. This is something Healey's boyhood friend, now a lawyer, picks up on and as such it is profession that structures their relationship. Neither can approach the other in any terms of intimacy without covering themselves with self-mockery and humour. Intimacy is a confusing issue for both and it is Healey's observation that the friend cannot get beyond profession in their relationship. Healey thinks about the times when he offered an opinion on a book and recognised that "it was never the opinion itself being judged but the opinion as described by a *person in his field*" (101). In the confusion of relation it is the sense of one's profession and the logic of consumption that fill the emptiness, cosseting the exhausted and the estranged.[13]

---

[13] However, the force of profession is shown by Wilkins to be nothing less than a metaphor for social isolation. An image of this metaphor is found in the "seating plan" for the law lectures Healey attends. The

Such is the case of contemporary decathexis that the language with which we once framed appeals to "god", "trust" and "truth" is now used only in conjunction with the processes of commerce and occupation. The terms and language in which we believed we related to the world and to others, the words and phrases that structured a coherency and certainty in interrelation, the same language and power of representation that has been so radically undone with the advent of post-structuralisms, postmodernisms and deconstruction, retains specious and nostalgic certitude within the confines of profession and the spectacle of consumption. As such it is salesmen, doctors and lawyers who maintain control over an economy of these terms and, as Robert has noted, this represents something of a "hijacking" of the personal. But it is the appeal to certainty that is at issue, a certainty made saleable by the laws of consumption and made attractive for its packaging as nostalgia. This appeal to certainty is apparent when Adrian and Daniel attend the trade fair and Daniel becomes involved in a vacuum cleaner salesman's demonstration. "I want to show you something about trust" begins the salesman's pitch, "Trust in something that does what it says its supposed to do. Something old fashioned and plain like that" (31).

The salesman's phrasing rings with something like a sense of revelation given that as Teresa has previously observed in the text, this is a society skewed upon deconstruction. As she says, "nothing is just itself" (9), and a bit further on, "There really is nothing that's innocent any more" (10). Teresa's comments allude to the condition of a society's crisis of representation, a culture's disrupted and exhausted relation to both epistemological and ontological "reality". Quite simply, everything is 'up for grabs', and in the felt relativism of this deconstructionist collective sensibility the vacuum salesman's pitch offers consolation through nostalgia. This is a nostalgia for the now exhausted forms and structures of certainty and authority. The salesman of course misses the irony of being a vacuum cleaner salesman: the spectacle he makes with his appeal to "trust" reveals that such a notion exists in a more figurative vacuum. It is the vacuum of an exhausted

---

seating plan, or grid, is significant in that it represents the certainty something like law or medicine, or, for that matter, commerce represents in relation to a world suffering a crisis of representation. The sense of a profession, the boundaries or borders implied by occupation, is then like the grid of the seating plan. Profession provides the "box" or identity in which the individual may recognise themself and manage their relation to other "boxes" in the grid. The grid is symbolic of any proscriptive ratiocinative system whereby fixity and definition is established. When Healey visits his friend from the law school, now a lawyer, he thinks of their friendship as one of "mutual and affable misunderstanding in which each man had assigned the other to a box in which his name was written in tight, almost indecipherable lettering" (113).

society, just as it is the inner vacuity of the individuals of that society that is really at stake here.

So it is "trust" as much as a vacuum cleaner that the salesman is selling, though what eventuates is more properly a lesson in scepticism. Initially, however, Daniel appears to accept at face value the 'trust' the salesman is selling and brings the toxic, "stunt" coffee to his lips rather than spilling it on the carpet. Nothing is "just itself" and this is true of the coffee, which, like the trust the salesman has on offer, is meretricious and uncertain fare. The coffee is finally spilt and in the process Daniel has inadvertently pointed out the limits of the consumer spectacle and the notion of trust imbued within it.

What seems evident is that the uncertainty about selfhood and the referencing of meta-terms the self desires to make are, to some degree, felt to be accounted for by the cosseting influence of profession. Moreover, it is a logic of consumption that is supposed to shore up the uncertain, exhausted self, and primarily this is a false solace generated through an appeal to nostalgia.[14]

As I have suggested, the exhaustion of feeling and empathy is revealed in the confusion characters feel towards intimacy, and as I have also been suggesting, this confusion has seen the conflation of the private sphere of interrelation and exchange with the public realm of consumption, commerce and profession. This is something that is made explicit in *Little Masters* in the relationship between Emily and her employer, Suzanne. As a Nanny Emily is positioned liminally on the boundary of commercial and private relations; she is both a confidante and a "service" for the consumption of the family. Indeed, like the generation I argue she is representative of she is a "border hopper" (*L.M.*, 21), someone who finds themselves in between the indeterminacy of estrangement and belonging, familiar and other.[15] It is into this sort of confusion that

---

[14]Nostalgic appeals are those which address notions of the truth, the real and authenticity. But nostalgia is also all that a culture of exhaustion has left when through forsaking its history it is also forsaking the present. Thus, at the trade fair an artist is governed by a nostalgic vision that is articulated through his portraiture. As an observer notices, everyone looks like they are "from the fifties" (34).

[15]The relationship between Sarah and Jilly (*Little Masters*) also explores this uncertain terrain between an employer and employee revealing the condition of 'friendship' to be depthless and cobbled together by contract. Hence, the state of exhaustion and confusion present in relationships is revealed when the currency or framework of consumption and profession is broken down. A "friendship" is thus exposed when Jilly finds out about Sarah's affair with Piet. The heat in the exchange between the two women is generated over the contestation of what is private and what is professional; it is a question of where friendship ends and where employment begins. Despite verbal reminders of their ostensible friendship ("Look I'm telling you this as a

both Suzanne and Emily feel their relationship fall when after disclosing some "little facts" (*L.M.*, 8) about their private selves, intimacy threatens. The moment occurs when Suzanne, in her daughter's playroom, seems suddenly aware of the discomfort and anxiety associated with the "tapping" and expression of intimacies. From this moment Suzanne performs a rapid retreat: she moves away from personal disclosure and briskly claps her hands together, her eyes, as Emily notes, "glistening". Intimacy is avoided because with it come vulnerability, pain and confusion. Suzanne responds to her discomfort by substituting the language of commerce and the insinuation of profession into the scene of personal disclosure. The effect sees that Emily is promptly reminded that she is an employee, a Nanny: "Emily, thank you. Thanks. Really. And whenever you stay longer here, you know that we'll make that up to you, understand, you'll be recompensed, okay?" (*L.M.*, 92). The uncertain terrain of emotions is thus accounted for by the more measured and measurable concerns of consumption. Suzanne's response is indicative of a language and means of relation quite clearly based on the definable use and exchange values of pay, time, service and "recompensation".

In this case, as in most of the inter-subjective transactions Wilkins depicts of this "generation", the field of business and occupation with its logic of consumption is willingly invoked and invested in. It mediates the threat of intimacy feared because of the inquiry it represents into the condition of selfhood. Intimacy threatens too rigorous an evaluation of the self given that the responses, the depth of feeling it calls forth, may not be present. In short, intimacy and empathy require a "tapping of the reserves" which, as Healey has already noted, no one is sure are any longer there. Consumer relations replace personal relations in an attempt at shoring up the psychic ruins.

In many respects the professional in Wilkins' fiction is one who assumes to make the world knowable and ordered through the appropriation of form. The professions of commerce, law and medicine in Wilkins' texts are all professions which offer the form of truths and facts that resemble the consolation previously derived from meta-narratives. In contrast to such characters are those who feel the uncertainty of the contemporary situation and who are usefully enough referred to by Teresa as "border hoppers" (21). The difference between these two groups appears in the notion of perception; those cosseted

---

friend, I hope [263]") the two find themselves to be utter strangers. This is an example of a confusion over boundaries and a confusion over form and it comes with the discovery of the formlessness outside the borders of profession and the rules of consumption.

by profession continue in the world without feeling the same degree of uncertainty, loss and disorder that plagues those more liminally placed individuals. A lawyer or doctor misses the fact that empathy is at stake as they are confined with the "manner" and "ritual" of a profession that insulates against contingency. The liminal characters, those without their names in the great "seating plan" (*T.M.*, 113), like Teresa, Emily and David, Catherine, Adrian and Healey, Tim and Jilly, all shuttle back and forth in their restless lives. Adrian's mother sums this generation up when she describes Adrian's childhood as one of "endless searches" (47); and indeed, all search, in various ways, to heal what is felt as the disjuncture or contingency of the world as it stands in relation to memory, history, and to the self.

Up to this point in this chapter what we have observed can be described as the conditions and symptoms of a postmodern subjectivity; a context of exhaustion that, in the next chapter, I shall seek to align with the incipience of postmodernity itself. What comes next is then further conjecture as to the postmodern subjectivity that dominates Wilkins' fiction and, in particular, its relationship to history.

The "History Lesson": Heurisms, Transgressions and Inculcation.

This chapter, like the preceding one, is primarily involved with the issue of subjectivity; it represents conjecture about the construction of the postmodern subject and, specifically, its particular relation to history. Having said that, in Wilkins' fiction it is inculcation and transgression which structure the subject's experience and negotiation of history[1] and so this chapter progresses from a consideration of the heurisms of the novels' postmodernity (moments of transgression and disruption) to the force of familial inculcation: the transmission of generational impedimenta manifested in acts and behaviour associated with, if not instances of, transgression and disruption.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, exhaustion characterises the dominant mode of relation and subjectivity in Wilkins' fiction. Moreover, this exhaustion is indicative of a 'sense of an ending'; the notion that history - and the possibility of living with context and contiguity - has been stalled on the experiences of a progenitor (war) generation. The processes of inculcation that Wilkins uses to structure subjectivity and family in his fiction are thus built on the transmission of impedimenta consisting of exhaustion, transgression, the loss of selfhood, and detachment; indeed, all the effects we associate heuristically with the incipience of postmodernity itself. In Wilkins' texts inculcation is the "history lesson" (19) whereby the conditions of the 'new contingency' - transgression and disruption - are repeated and reiterated through succeeding generations.

What is called for and what, in the few 'masterful' cases, is achieved in Wilkins' texts is a re-contexualization of family and its patterns of inculcation. To do this is to re-align oneself to a sense of historical contiguity and, in the process, bridge the gap or 'disruption' - associated with previous generations - that has seemingly stalled, perhaps even exhausted, history.

This sense of 'bridging' or recontextualising is something Wilkins prepares for in his texts through his fusing of history with family. By Wilkins' aesthetic, history as an abstract - impersonal and vast - is linked inseparably with family in metonymical

---

[1]The exceptions to this are, of course, those characters I discuss primarily in the second half of the thesis and who I refer to as the 'little masters'

fashion.[2] Wilkins cannot and does not write about history ("incredible and inhuman")[3], but rather the personal and situated histories of family and friends and how, like the history of postmodernism's century, these familial histories represent, in metonymic fashion, similar moments of disruption, absence, loss and transgression. History is something we live with in so far as it is embodied: we occupy history in living with those around us. What we can say, then, is that in Wilkins' fiction the discussion of family is also implicitly a discussion of history.[4] Wilkins himself is recorded as making a similar point in an interview:

> if people have been given things, like Adrian with the child, they've also got to work out things that are long-term gifts - for instance their parents' pasts, their relationship with the past. I wanted to work into the novel the fact that people are not just under the pressure of the present events but that everyone works under the burden of everything else as well. I mean that's how you live your life, with differing levels of awareness and comprehension of those things.[5]

We live in and with history in living and interacting with others, and when an individual's ability for relation and empathy becomes exhausted then, so too, that individual's sense of historical contiguity suffers. In Wilkins' novels, history is reified in the familial and relational world: history is the people we live with.

For the majority of characters in Wilkins' novels the sense of contiguous history ends with the grandfather's experiences of the First World War in *The Miserables*. The grandfather's son, Healey's Uncle Tom, hardly appears in *The Miserables*, but for mention of his "mysterious blackouts" (31) and early death which is possibly the result of a severe battle fatigue or shell shock. His is the trauma which hangs like a spectre over the way both novels commit to a practice of structuring moments of loss. It is the experience we remember when other characters in both novels reference and are referenced by the language of loss: characters talk variously of "inheriting the trauma" (*L.M.*, 235) and of "impedimenta" (*L.M.*, 53), at one point Con, Adrian's uncle, refers to Teresa as a child

---

[2]The conflation of the historical and the familial is something Milan Kundera (*The Art of The Novel.* New York: Grove Press, 1988. p.106) observes in his understanding that "...the psychological mechanisms that function in great (apparently incredible and inhuman) historical events are the same as those that regulate private (quite ordinary and very human) situations". We note here the metonymical possibility of engaging with history through family and, indeed, this is contiguous with Wilkins' treatment of history as framed by the familial narrative of inculcation.

[3]See Kundera, p.106.

[4]As I shall later show through the example of the character Vanessa, re-connection with history (and historical context) is commensurate with a re-engagement with familial context.

[5]See Legat, Nicola. "The Next Wave". *North and South* 127, October 1996. p106.

who has been "told too much" (*L.M.*, 52) and Daniel is himself referred to as exhibiting a "hyper-naturally stoic" (*L.M.*, 46) demeanour similar to that of an "post-trauma victim" (*L.M.*, 46).

In this way the novels are constantly referring back to initiating moments of trauma. There are the experiences of Con in *Little Masters* who remembers waking up in Poland to the sound of the Nazis bombing his home town, and the starvation of his family. Adrian's mother has lost a sister because of the effects of this war and it is such an example of loss which makes her think that her tears ducts have dried up. There is also the collective memory of the Polish experiences of the Russian gulags for which Teresa, not in fact old enough to remember, nor even to have experienced, is a "conduit" (*L.M.*, 19). These are all experiences which point strongly to the kind of interruption of humanistic narratives, indeed of narrative itself, which are seen as the beginnings of the postmodern age.

These are interruptions sufficient, it seems, in the context of some of Wilkins' characters, to throw into a kind of chaos their condition of 'being-in-language' and consequently, 'being-in-the-world'. It is my suggestion that such experiences lie at the core of the detached and isolated subjectivities these novels depict. Moreover, we can say that such characters (primarily fathers in Wilkins' fiction) are brought to the realisation of the radical contingency of the world through the experience, in warfare, of something like what Jacques Lacan refers to as the *real*.

What is meant here by my use of the *real*, is simply any experience unmitigated by our symbolic order; experience beyond discourse or language which "remains foreclosed from the analytic experience, which is an experience of speech"[6]. The *real* is quite simply the ungraspable, it is prelinguistic until it is later constructed in and by symbolisation. Malcolm Bowie describes the *real* as "a world that falls entirely and irretrievably outside the signifying dimension".[7] In effect the "real" serves as one of the better descriptions of the experience of contingency which, in Wilkins' texts, coincides with the wars and especially the epistemic break generative of postmodernity. For most

---

[6] See Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits: A Selection.* Alan Sheridan. (trans.) London: Tavistock Publications, 1997.(p.ix)

[7] see Bowie, Malcolm. *Lacan.* Fontana Modern Masters. London: Fontana Press, 1991. p. 94.

of the characters in Wilkins' novels (the adults) it is from this moment that "the basis for the continuity of life within history"[8] has changed.

As such, the heurism of Wilkins' postmodern fiction and his exploration of subjectivity lie chiefly with the experiences of a Second World War, and the effect of the *real* felt as an utter sense of exhaustion and silence that has become the base experience inculcated through family. Characters have been subjected to experiences, or the knowledge of such experiences, which have in effect usurped language - their language - the way we "are-in-the-world". In effect these are characters who have suffered what Jerome Bruner sees as a rupture to interior narrative; "the rough and perpetually changing draft of our autobiography that we carry in our minds" and which "gives meaning and direction to our hourly living".[9]

The vast sense of absence, wordlessness and the inexplicable discovered as an effect of warfare has engendered absences and silences that returning soldiers have carried over into their private lives of family and relation. The impossibility of communicating these experiences is accompanied by a distance and detachment these men feel towards their families. The grandfather of *The Miserables* is the prime example of this as he demonstrates what his daughters later come to describe as a "kind of amnesia" (36), a sort of "affair" he has with himself in forgetting his 'responsibilities'; his family. It is this sense of disengagement, linked to the acknowledgment about the inefficacy and contingency of language, that in the grandfather's relationships establishes a paradigm of "detachment" and distance; a sense of withdrawal from affect and feeling, from compassion and empathy and from the world. Wilkins' novels thus radiate from an initial (historical) trauma that Wilkins does not write 'about' so much as embody in the aphasic and narcissistic subjectivities his novels record.

Variously and throughout both texts characters think about and voice an awareness of inculcation. Suzanne in *Little Masters* is thinking about this when she considers how "everything is generational. Look at my life [...] God, how many mistakes have I repeated, you'd think a child was no more than a parrot the way they mimic" (115), while "the American" in *The Miserables*, in conversation with Healey, muses how it is "funny

---

[8]See Jurgen Habermaas in Clendinnen, Inga. *Reading the Holocaust*. Text Publishing, Melbourne: Australia, 1998. p.15.
[9]See Clendinnen, p.33.

how that old stuff comes back to haunt you, [...] won't ever let up" (42). However, it is not a question of history repeating that Wilkins is concerned with, but rather the effects of history (particularly, contingency, transgression and detachment) as they are inculcated in the family system. Two passages in *Little Masters* taken from Teresa's sessions with Robert describe the process of inculcation that both novels iterate, and usefully gesture towards the particular history of the "war story" (19), and the generation to whom, as Teresa says, "something very peculiar and nasty happened" (20). It is the dialogue concerning Teresa's father and his "unknowability" that is the prompt for what amounts to a foregrounding conjecture into the processes of inculcation and what Teresa refers to as her "history lesson" (19).

> 'You talk of this unknowability, Teresa, the occasional glimpse, and yet you have at your command this highly detailed, richly related family history, especially the history of your parents as children, the War story. So on the one hand you know everything it seems but you're also saying, on the other hand, there's a - what? - a gap?'
>
> 'But if I did have it all, as you say, at my command, I'd be okay, wouldn't I. The truth is I don't possess any control, none whatsoever. Where's my power base? It rules, it commands me. I'm a conduit, that's all. A history lesson,... This is not control, this is not memory. This is tyranny (19).'

The "gap" is the vacancy or silence of Teresa's own story and subjectivity, and it is the absence of this story that leaves her powerless to control the impedimenta passed on by her parents. Teresa is without her own context (a "power base") and so the context of her parents' experiences rules her, though it is this narrative of the "war story" - a story about contingency, loss and disruption - that is responsible for the dispossession of Teresa's subjectivity in the first place. Moreover, this "gap" or silence is indicative of the inability of Teresa's generation to live lives in the full vocabulary of affect and emotional engagement: the ability for tenderness and relation.

The "history lesson" that Teresa talks about is revealed in the process of familial inculcation as the re-iteration of "unknowability", exhaustion and silence. This is a process, as Teresa considers, akin to a form of "tyranny": inculcation is a false form of memory in which the subject is little more than a "conduit". However, it is a second passage that more directly outlines this process of inculcation (actually using this word), aligning it with the efforts of Polish refugees to "make very sure that their own kids, while thoroughly absorbed into this beneficent, inviolable foreign atmosphere, retained or in fact were inculcated into the ways, the psychology of what they themselves had been orphaned from". Teresa continues:

> Now you talked about a gap before. Well, I know virtually nothing about my parents' early married life and somehow even our early family life is hard to get a grip on. I feel as though it's all very forgettable. But the War, *their* childhoods and adolescences, the camps, these fill every hole in the fabric. They're like some dye the way they ... stain everything ... the entire ancestral sheet. So yes, everything in my dreams belongs to someone else (22).

We note here the force of this inculcation and its displacement of Teresa's childhood: it is "their [the parents] childhoods and adolescences" that are remembered, while Teresa's childhood and even the early life of the family seem elusive and "very forgettable". If inculcation describes the process whereby the narrative of one generation saturates and structures the emerging narratives of the next, then here it is the experience of contingency, transgression and loss that saturates the following generation's narratives. Nevertheless, the process of inculcation is one of legacy: the passing on of what Con refers to as "impedimenta" (52). The "history lesson" is that of the end of history. In so far as characters deal with these impedimenta (those of silence and transgression), then characters are dealing with the post-war condition: the condition of postmodernity.

As a result of the process of inculcation these characters, grouped loosely by Wilkins in relation to the wars as "the children of the children left" (*L.M.*,21), grow up without having properly experienced their childhoods. Too soon they are made into adults and made culpable for the experiences of loss and silence their parents feel. Such children grow up without a sense of autonomy or subjectivity, indeed with their own memories supplanted by those of their parents and grandparents. In a moment of insight in *The Miserables* Healey considers his condition - his relation to his family, his friends, the past and his subjectivity - and concludes that

> he believed he had developed as an adult several afflictions which he might properly have grown out of had he suffered from them as a child [...] as if, finally stricken by these infant diseases, he was suddenly prone to the delayed virulence of all those years of incubation (11).

The question raised here is not so much about the development of certain "afflictions", but whether or not, considering the effects of the inculcation I have been talking about, Healey has experienced a full childhood. The suggestion is that Healey's childhood has been in a kind of suspension or "incubation". Childhood diseases as well as subjectivity have been prevented their articulation and maturation since childhood itself has been

interrupted or usurped. Inculcation wrenches youth from the innocence and expectation of childhood and as a result a generation of a-historic, a-subjective identities emerge.

In *Little Masters* Adrian avers a sense of wariness towards the pattern of inculcation when he is unsure about whether or not "a parent [should] show the full range of himself to a child" (46), and although he is himself arguably another one of the victims of a Father's transgression,[10] he is also another of his generation to share a discussion on the effects of inculcation. The discussion Adrian has with his uncle Con is very much about history or 'histories' as they are concerned with family and responsibility. In this conversation the process of inculcation - in this case framed by Adrian's family's Polish history - is treated, and we can see further the pattern of this familial paradigm.

Con takes Adrian aside to "tell him something about his father or about the future" (48) and in this easy conflation of the past (Adrian's father) and Adrian's future the sense of historical culpability attendant to the present is once again suggested. Con's point though is about differentiation - an effort overdue in respect to the way he has raised his own son, Stefan - made in an effort of concession or release on behalf of an older generation and the sense of culpability and burden with which they have held a younger generation in thrall. "You are not us, Adrian", says Con, "not us oldies. No matter what we wish, you are you" (49). In the conversation that follows between them it is through an attention to the past, its effects and the inculcation of these effects or "impedimenta" that Con attempts to bequeath Adrian his autonomy: a removal of the "tyranny" of memory.

From this point on Con attempts to tackle in his own inebriated and tangential fashion the whole question of the inculcated narrative, and in particular the tendency of the familial narrative towards meta-narrative.[11] As such Con talks about the significance of

---

[10] In this case it is Father Daley who appears to be a possible transgressor figure, and this is something I discuss later in this chapter. See page 42.

[11] If the observance of metanarrative is used to distinguish postmodernity (as Lyotard most famously does) then Wilkins' fiction is justifiably postmodern in so far as it also treats and responds to questions of metanarrative. In Wilkins' writing metanarrative is something that is presented in the construction of family, and in making this connection among constructions of family, history and narrative Wilkins' observation is matched in Kafka's writing which, as Kundera points out, "demonstrates that it was from the family, from the relationship between a child and the deified power of the parents, that Kafka drew his knowledge of the technique of culpabilization [and the link] between the family's private 'totalitarianism' and that in his great social visions" (109). Thus, in metonymical and attenuated fashion Wilkins is writing to the condition of postmodernity.

"little narratives" or "details": "It's details. The details of each personal disaster are worthy of our attention and that's all. And, my nephew, we *are* all personal disaster areas and no one *is* worthy" (50). Con's statement remains ambiguous and one cannot be sure whether his point is solely the disabusement of the inculcation of familial metanarrative or a statement of his own guilt and disappointment about his parenting of Stefan. This is a suggestion made more apparent when Con appears to talk about his relation to his past and his son:

> Sometimes I think this - if we could follow back each life, if we could reverse the tape, slow it down, pause it in the place, we might find the moment when we got ourselves onto the wrong track. And I also think that if we did this we might find that we went off, started off on the wrong trail, often knowing quite well it was wrong (51).

In effect Con is historicising the moment of the postmodern, and his nostalgia is for a point in time before the onset of the contingency that, for him (as well as the majority of Wilkins' figures), is inseparable from an experience of the postmodern as disruptive, destructive and filled with loss. For such a generation this 'postmodernism' (and its contingency) is something they are as wary of as they are wearied by.[12]

As I have suggested, it is with the fathers of Wilkins' fiction that the pattern of inculcation and its effects are situated. Teresa, in her chapter, makes this clear when she talks about the prominence of the nightmare that rules her subjectivity as her "dear father's gift to [her]" (18), and also when she says to Robert, "But I don't blame him [...] How idiotic it would be to blame him" (20). Teresa's exculpation of her father is derived from his 'blameless-ness' at being incarcerated in the Russian gulags, though such men are, in another way, culpable for the impact they have had on their children, and it is this sense of culpability (as well as sense of profound withdrawal) that Con describes when he makes something of a confession to Adrian. We note in the following passage the connections Con makes among the conditions of fatherhood, relation and history. This passage is significant also for the reason that Con is here speaking on behalf of all the silent and detached men/fathers that populate Wilkins' writing:

---

[12]Con's image of the "tape" also recalls Teresa's imploring of her father to "replay the tape" (22), and while both analogies suggest the possibility of identifying the moment when things went "wrong" it is the suggestion (in truth present only in Con's statement) that they knew better, that they knew it was wrong to raise their children into their world of impedimenta and exhaustion, that prefigures the sense of transgression I will soon come to. However, both Teresa's and Con's appeals are to a return to a pre-postmodern (perhaps enlightenment) past and a negation of the present. In so far as both appeals signify an avoidance of the contemporary there can be no experience of historic continuity, and so what remains is a recanting of the inculcatory processes - the repetition of a previous 'reality' - that Teresa is herself subject to.

> Lord how I *never* wanted to get up. Even when I had the best reasons to, *especially* then. Look, people said to me, it's snowing. Hey, see how out there, they said, it's spring. There are flowers in our window box. And what did I do? I refused. I clung to my stupor and I hated the snow and the new buds. All that worldly *expectation*. How tiring. How I *still* fight against each morning. [...] Each morning I have my private battle which I always lose, which actually I have no interest in ever winning. Because when I win, I'll be dead or as good as. [...] Why should I feel this way? What happened to me? Where's the trigger? Is there a cause? You know, Adrian, even as the bombs fell, I lay there. All the shit the Nazis could throw at us, [...] I just lay there (31).

Of course much of Con's dialogue with Adrian is metaphorical and he is noted in the text for the drunken and affected manner with which he gets carried away with his speech. Nevertheless, in the reference to the "best reasons" and the "new buds" we can read much of the relationship between Con and his children. Con wonders about his state of exhaustion and withdrawal from the world and his bewilderment, though connected to the invasion of Poland, anticipates the bewilderment of the generations to come. But it is Con's reaction to "all that worldly expectation" that reveals the source of his culpability, as it is "expectation" in particular, the expectations of a child, that Con comes to fight against every morning. Con's rejection of "all that worldly expectation" is also a rejection of his children's generation and is a reaction informed by his experiences of the arbitrary and destructive world - experiences we imagine to be situated with the memories of childhood in Poland, waiting to be bombed. Con's relationship with Stefan and the way he has ostensibly given up on him speaks to the sense of futility that as a young father Con must have felt in relation to the world, as well as to the possibility of communicating notions like empathy, tenderness or love.

In short, the shaping generation of fathers in Wilkins' fiction are unsure about how to resume being the men they were before the war; these are fathers with an identity crisis. In the absence of this previous authority a new contingency has arisen, and with this new complications, chief amongst them a profound sense of doubt about the means of continuing with intimacy and empathy; doubt about masculinity, father-hood and doubt about relationship itself. This new complexity of life (what I refer to as the contingency of the world) is then what many now refer to as the postmodern situation and it is to this situation that Wilkins addresses his characters and his fiction.

As such, fathers are described as uncertain presences and with more than a degree of foreignness: when Teresa is asked about her father she responds that asking her to describe her father would be like asking her to describe her back: "he's just this presence I

guess, unknowable but there, close, whatever" (19). Healey records a similar sense of distance from his father when remembering how one morning he was "sent to look for the man who had left the house as usual at around eight a.m." (60). What registers here is a kind of silence, a detachment and "gap", common in Wilkins' fiction, in the relationship between a father and a child.

Fathers in Wilkins' fiction occupy a silence or absence in relation to their families: they are the embodiment of an historical exhaustion and exhausted history; they remain detached and distant from those in their care. The absence these men seem to represent is stretched over a scale beginning with anonymity and extending to forms of transgression and abuse. It is (primarily) from the relationship of the father to the child that the sort of postmodern subjectivity Wilkins depicts is generated.[13]

Thus, we observe a bitterness in Healey's narrative when he remembers his father's "scheme" to climb Mt. Edgeware. As the father belligerently approaches the mountain Healey senses "in his father an urgency to overcome the failures of the immediate past with a throttling of the present" (90). Here we note a concordance with the sentiment Con has previously averred in relation to the present and the generation of his son; the sense of historicity in Healey's statement is implicit, but obvious enough: quite apart from the frustration of the moment - the father's trouble in gaining access to the mountain - the "urgency" is shared by the majority of Wilkins' characters (especially fathers) all of whom make (or have made) the "present" culpable with, or present to, the losses and transgressions of their pasts. Moreover, Healey's choice of words - "throttling" - suggests an aspect of transgression that, as I shall later show, introduces a more physical form of transgression that *Little Masters* (more than *The Miserables*) elucidates.

With their father out of earshot Healey, in the same scene as the above, turns in an side to his older brother and suggests how

---

[13]Fathers are not alone in the responsibility for the inculcation of loss and detachment in Wilkins' fiction. Healey's mother as we have already observed remains distant to the family, especially when any of the father's schemes are involved. But the phone call that, arguably, is the trigger for the writing (by Healey) of *The Miserables* is itself a recording of distance and estrangement. She is upset, and she forgets to say "grandfather", saying instead "daddy" which Healey recognises as "private language -- his mother talking to her sisters". Healey has the sense while talking to his mother of "overhearing" something private; he feels like a stranger, hearing something "unbearably personal". What is present in this scene is the sense of a mother's restraint and withholding in the relationship to her son, and perhaps this is not at all surprising since she is, after all, also shaped by her father's example.

> next year he [...] would have his driver's license wouldn't he -- and they'd drive off -- wouldn't they -- and leave the silly bastard where they couldn't find him. 'You'll be fifteen then [...] then things will change (91).

The older brother's silence is notable here for the relation it bears to the odd behaviour and sense of emotional detachment he exhibits throughout the rest of the novel. At another point in the novel Healey describes his brother as "ill" and in doing so attempts to sum up something of his brother's manner and subjectivity. As the novel shows, however, this is an 'illness' that Healey himself shares in, and while causes are never declared in Wilkins' fiction, the bitterness present in the above passage when combined with the reference to a "throttling of the present", suggests that responsibility for this "illness" lies, in particular, with fathers.

Jilly's father, Graham, another returned serviceman, is yet another father who has remained distant and unknowable to his children. But more than this, Graham represents a generation of "unreadable" men, and it is at his funeral that his 'mates' try to fathom or perform a reading of him.[14] Despite the best efforts of the friends, Graham - or Gray, as he is referred to - remains to them, as he does to his children, a "grey" area - indeterminate and private.

One of the most complex of father figures in Wilkins' fiction is Con. In his conversations with Adrian Con brings to the text an awareness of the consequences of inculcation informed by regrets about his treatment of his own son, Stefan. Con is a figure of compassion and empathy, and yet his relationship with Stefan (as we learn) is also one of the more obviously destructive and embittering relationships of the novels. Furthermore, this relationship is seen by Wilkins as typical of a war generation's inability for relationship. Teresa, for example, could have been his child, but Stefan is and Stefan is also isolated, bitter and angry. Con's rejection of Stefan's letter-writing casts Stefan adrift, denying him a voice and a narrative. Con makes silent his relationship with his son, and this is significant as a symbolic muting of the younger generation continues the pattern of inculcation.

---

[14] An extension of the metaphor of "unreadab[ility]" is accorded by Wilkins when he has Graham, suffering from cancer, undergo a kind of mapping enacted by his physicians. Jilly remembers her father thus with lines drawn over his flesh and she thinks of him as the "illustrated man"(238). Again this is a mapping practice or reading that proves, at least figuratively, to be ineffectual: Graham dies not long after, still a "private man", unreadable; a figure of silence.

The silencing Con enacts on Stefan through the refusal of his letter-writing is emblematic of a paternal relationship in which a child has not been permitted to become "author" of themself. Whereas in the case of Teresa an older narrative [her parents'] has usurped the development of her own, for Stefan, an older narrative has foreclosed upon his own. As a result Stefan occupies a liminality in relation to his father, and indeed to his home. Stefan exists in a world where he has little or no contact with the events and developments of his family and where, without the markers of change and growth - the connection to a context - that the exchange of letters and language provides, he has become suddenly corpulent and old. *The Miserables* has set a precedent for this with characters described as "prematurely old" (28) and on other occasions as manifesting an "overworked, overtired youthfulness" (39). Faced with his cousin, Adrian cannot account for this rapid ageing; in simple terms, Stefan has been out of touch; more figuratively, however, Stefan has been cut adrift from a sense of history and contiguity (commensurate in Wilkins' fiction with being out of touch with family), and the result is this out-of-step appearance.

Stefan proves to be a useful example of the effects of inculcation and in particular, the way his subjectivity and his 'a-historicity' have been shaped by the relationship between himself and his father. Stefan, we note, is in the construction/deconstruction industry; as the owner of an antique kitset furniture business he has remained true to his postmodern subjectivity, working with fragments of time and identity. In dealing with the 'antique' through this 'kitset' method Stefan is also in a metaphorical sense attempting to construct his subjectivity from the fragments of his past. Moreover, this is an attempt to 'build' an identity from a series of false representations of the past; a fakery or forgery committed in an attempt to reconstruct a sense of history from the pieces he is left with.

The issue of inculcation is made overtly present in relation to the production of the "antique" when discussion turns to the manufacturing technique and, in particular, the Scottish craftsman, Davey.[15] Stefan comments on the effects of inhaling the stain the

---

[15]Davey is yet another model for the effects of inculcation, a process detrimental to the present in its effect on short term memory. Very much like the cousin in *The Miserables* he appears in the text almost as a metafictional character; he is no more than a signifier, a caricature, silent but for the bad phonetic impression Stefan makes of his Scottish accent. Davey in this instance is himself made into a replica, and a poor one at that. If there is a sense here that Davey is little more than a sentence, in effect, a figure with no interiority, then it is a suggestion followed up by Wilkins in his placement, or 'stage managing', of the next scene which is concerned again with replicas, specifically the wax figures of Madame Tussaud's museum.

company uses on the product and how eventually, this will destroy Davey's short term memory. If we pursue the metaphor as Wilkins seems to want us to do, we note the connection between Teresa's phrase on inculcation: "the staining of the ancestral sheet" and that of Davey's activity: the "staining" of the "antiques". We seem to be invited to see loss of short term memory as an effect of inculcation seen in the removal of contemporary and autonomous memory. In the case of Teresa, we see this as the removal of her memories by the inculcation of her parents' "antique" impedimenta. This is what Stefan and Davey produce, the material of antique memory: replicas of a past tradition made at a cost of personal memory and identity.

Stefan is another example of an individual whose subjective development, or lack of it, is the result of a father's detachment from his child. The image of silencing that Con here represents in terms of his relationship to Stefan is important, and is one we imagine in relation to the grandfather of *The Miserables*, whose "monumentality" and "hugeness" (14), as the young Healey recalls them, are associated with a weight we can imagine almost as a large outsized hand pressed over the mouths of children - a weight we can associate with the burdening of impedimenta. So heavy and perhaps dire are these "impedimenta" of generations that the childish subjectivity has not the strength to resist them.

What we see in the example of Stefan is what is also true of Wilkins' fiction where fathers are responsible for the transmission of inculcation and the transmutation of originating moments of loss and transgression. This loss is demonstrated in both novels variously as forms of neglect and withdrawal as well as moments of physically transgressive behaviour, but all of these 'moments' serve as metonyms for the shaping (heuristic) forces we assume have ushered in the postmodern era. However, quite apart from these vast and public displays of loss, Wilkins' novels are built, as I have said, on private figurings of loss: narratives of interruption and transgression on a local and familial scale.

In *Little Masters* we find an image of this metonymic relationship between local/familial transgression and the notion of history when Emily views a "tableau of local history" at a Bierfest. Moreover, this scene is crucial to Wilkins' construction of familial inculcation and the role that fathers play in it. Here in the "tableau" Wilkins invests not only the pattern of inculcation I have been describing but also shows the implicit relationship between familial narrative and history; between fathers and

transgression. We note the violence "ghosted", as Emily says, within the tableau, and connect it with what I have previously described as the transmission of transgression or inculcation. Moreover, in the mechanised motions of the figures of the tableau - Emily sees them as a father and a son - we have an image of history ("local history" in this case) repeating itself. The assumption here is that this repetition of history is found and described in and by familial forms of inculcation. For these reasons this passage is, I think, worth quoting almost in its entirety. The passage begins with Emily wandering around at a Bierfest in midwest America:

> She [Emily] went inside a booth where a tableau of local history was being enacted by life-size mechanical figures. A man in a costume not unlike those outside for hire stood on a bucket full of apples. He put one foot on the bottom rung then he removed it again and his face, painted with a vacant smile, turned slowly around to look at the audience, which consisted of Emily. She felt oddly implicated by this stare. They were strangely alone, her and this grinning apple-picker, both of them caught in the airless booth, the noise of the people outside sealing them more completely inside. She felt he had a message for her. And this was a feeling made more intense by the presence of a mechanical boy who stood nearby pulling up and down on a rope which led into a well. The boy's head also turned every few seconds but his smile didn't quite come off. Or perhaps the person who had made him had wanted to show effort too, the strain of pulling up the water. The result was a kind of grimace, a brave front, but also despair. It was despair, she thought, jolly despair.
>
> Emily watched this pair for several minutes. Their futile, repeating motions were vaguely hypnotic. The father in his heavy apple picking boots might easily, she imagined, with a few adjustments to his internal gearings, lash out and kick the boy as he squatted with the rope. The longer she stood in front of the tableau, the more strongly she came to believe that this suggestion had been planted within the scene itself. You were supposed to see these ghosted movements behind the programmed ones. The toil of these immigrants' lives, through which the town outside had been established, seemed to carry the inflections of a thoroughly ordinary, domestic violence. Of course the poor boy got kicked. The father was a swine who knew no better. Suddenly it seemed like a remarkably brave, truthful installation (94).

What we have in the image of the tableau is a staging of the pattern of familial inculcation. What Emily observes as the "futile repeating motions" can be seen as the action of inculcation itself. As a "scene from local history", the tableau is also very much a "history lesson", describing the way history has, in so far as it is embodied, become a condition of repetition. The tableau also provides a link to the suggestion of violence and transgression the novels also "ghost" along with what amounts to an endorsement of the readerly practice where "you [are] supposed to see the ghosted movements behind the programmed ones". What is implicit in Emily's reading of the tableau and what remains implicit throughout both texts is that violence is always a possibility within this form of

inculcation, being only ever a "ghosting" or a "few adjustments to internal gearings" away.[16]

In the "airless" quality of the tableau booth, the way Emily feels "sealed" from the outside world and the recording of those "futile repeating motions", there is a further connection to be made with another scene from *The Miserables.* Again, this is a connection which demonstrates something more about the quality of inculcation, family and history. The connection becomes apparent when we consider Healey observing the 'sealed' nature of his family at the interment. The family is a closed set as Healey notes, "the doling out of a limited resource -- a certain chin, a thickness of the female calf, a foreshortening of the male neck -- amounting to an endlessness of variation, but no new thing" (9). In conjunction with the tableau scene we see the presentation of the family and its inculcation in its own repetitive form. The image is of a family system and a system of generations approaching a state of exhaustion; "no new thing" but a futile repetition.

Like the "airless booth" the tableau is situated in, family also has become a sealed system where older narratives, violate and interfuse the new, leaving no room for new narratives, or the development of difference in future generations. As such the violence inherent in the family system can be viewed as a sort of cannibalisation: a system that has turned in on itself by turning on its children. In foreclosing on the development of succeeding generations the system is foreclosing on the possibility of a regeneration of history or the idea of history as continually occurring.

We have discussed the inculcation of narrative and now it is the second part of this exhausted system, the sense of transgression, that is at issue. This involves not simply a father's neglect, but rather moments of abuse, physical and sexual. Violence is something that is only ever "ghosted" in *The Miserables* though throughout the novel there are

---

[16] The tableau and its violence recall a scene from *The Miserables* in which, at the grandfather's funeral, a child kicks dirt on the back of his mother's legs and is rounded on by the mother, a trowel in her hand, raised as if to strike the child. Again, this is a scene of familial violence and in the text it is paused, as if like tableau: "She turned quickly on the boy, raising her hand, and for an unbearable series of seconds the funeral party seemed frozen by the audacity of both the act and the response it was threatening to call up. The trowel hung above the whole group" (9). Note, it is "audacity" that is described, not shock or alarm, but rather a kind of surprise at the boldness of the action. This boldness is, then, like the "remarkably brave, truthful installation" Emily observes in the tableau. The violence at the funeral seems expected by the family group as though somehow it fits with the behaviour and history of this group.

various characters who behave and react in ways odd enough to suggest the effects of a major, un-named transgression. We think of the cousin's decent into his "hellish vortex" emblematised by his headlong dash down Mt. Edgeware, as well as Healey's brother and his sense of separation and detachment that seems reified in his cutting of the schoolboy's woollen jersey. Indeed, the brother appears as something of a victim in this novel to the extent that Healey's resolution at the base of Mt. Edgeware that next year "things will change" promotes textual queries into what lies at the core of this need for change. Images of a grandfather hovering close over the child Healey, "approaching and receding" and of a man "[un]likely to repulse the advances of small children" (15) do, however, begin to accrue as context for readings of transgression. But these contexts are only "ghosted" and, as such, remain ambiguous. Nevertheless, we read to find out what is behind the "special bond"(15) Healey as a child feels towards the grandfather and the dream Healey has of "occupying the citadel of the knee" (15).

What is happening here, we ask just as Wilkins' characters seem often to do: "What happened there?", "What happened to those boys?"(*T.M.*,139), "What happened to me? Where's the trigger?"(*L.M.*, 57). It is this conjecture which shrouds the depiction of transgression, especially in the first novel. More images gather around these suggestions when the grandfather, for example, rigs the garden hose to 'peep' into the girl's toilet and spray them when they flush. Context deepens the suggestion of the sexual here as, more than the phallic hose, the play on (peeping) Tom's name, and the "humiliation" and "taboo" of the toilet, it is the implicit sexual misrelation between the father and his wife which provides a prurient edge. For this suggestion we are given the image of the father tending the roses though, in truth, he is only tending his alibi. As Angela (one of his daughters) later says, he was only tending the roses "figuratively speaking" (35). The father is worried, as he says, about an "unseasonable frost" though this "frost" has more to do with the frigidity of his relations with his wife than it does the climate. As such, the scene involving the peeping hose is cathected with a transgressive, symbolic content: sexual frustration. There is also the final scene of the novel where two adult men undress a child and place that child between them in a 'human sandwich'. There is a context for this that is laudable and humane, but there is sufficient "ghosting" in this text to colour this action as prurient also.

We make conjecture about the source of these various contexts but *The Miserables* does not provide any answers. *Little Masters*, however, is a different case and much of the suggestions or 'ghostings' of contexts *The Miserables* makes find some basis in this

novel. In fact, to me, *Little Masters* quite clearly provides the moments and memory of abuse and transgression that explain the subjectivity we find throughout both novels. This is not to say, however, that *Little Masters* does not continue this process of "ghosted" and ambiguous contexts.

In *Little Masters* textual suspicions divulge contextual basis for readings of transgression, especially between adults (parents) and children. Adrian and Daniel, we notice, are stopped by passport control at Heathrow, and Michaela and Gert are also stopped by Canadian immigration staff at the border. Stefan is the voice of such suspicions when he says: "I would have stopped you too, at any border, I would have questioned you" (126), and the Canadian official is reported as saying, "he always gave special attention to men travelling alone with small kids " (117). Suspicion is, then, in this case, its own context, and it surfaces when we read some of the details from Teresa's dreams, as in her sense of the claustrophobia of the cramped conditions of the Gulags and the "smell of people close to me, all over me, their sweat. The personal private ... glue of our skins constantly touching" (17).

However the ghosting of transgression - in particular, sexual transgression - remains ghosted throughout both novels up to the point in *Little Masters* when Adrian hears that Daniel has been taken to see Adrian's old priest, Father Daley. Adrian's reaction here speaks to a concern for Daniel's wellbeing, increased, it seems, by Adrian's own memories and experiences of the church and, in particular, of Father Daley. "You took him to see Father Daley?" asks Adrian, "When did this happen? [...] I don't believe you took him without even telling me [...] You didn't make him go to confession, did you?" (36). It is here on this point about confession that an element of transgression is apparent: "it would terrify him to be shut inside that dark box with a man you can't see, blowing his breath at you and asking for your secrets" (37). Adrian is, it seems, speaking to his own fears.

From this point in the novel the suggestion of sexual abuse, in particular by a father/Father, becomes stronger, and while the image of David's colonic irrigation is a provocative sodomitic reference, it is the character Tim who is responsible for introducing the idea of sexual transgression more explicitly. In doing this Tim also connects transgression once again with the process of inculcation. This moment is prefaced by Tim's reflection on his family and his past: "Had his father been mad? Was old Miss Charlotte? Was Jilly?" (233); and on his dead sister, Candice. Tim's thoughts

begin to run together and he thinks also of Tess of the d'Urbervilles[17], and in doing so conflates her tears with those of his sister: "He had become distracted when he wanted only to concentrate on this small part of himself. There was always interference" (233). His frustration is his inability for clarity, and "interference" describes this shift and interplay of contexts from thoughts on "Stonehenge" to "girls' tears". But "interference" is also a 'tip' to the text's own layering of contexts, and again, one of these is that of sexual transgression. Tim voices this when, out of reflex, he baulks at the word "interference", a word, as the narrator relates,

> Tim didn't particularly care for since it suggested either something mysterious or nastily sexual, [...] maybe it *was* the precious, strange cargo he carried, his little masters sitting in the boot of his car. He didn't know what he would do with them. He felt he had come by them through deviousness, sadness, tragedy, and it was not something he wanted to pass on (233).

In this instance "interference" is a metaphor not only for disruption and transgression (its suggestion of something "nastily sexual"), but in a metafictional sense for the interplay of contexts at work in the fiction. The word "interference" acts in the text as a kind of pun, bringing together the aspects of physical/sexual interference with the notion of inculcation (generational interference), as well as an interference of contexts that the reader must endure. More than anything, however, interference is seen as a product of a postmodern condition where contingency sees to it that experience, expression and communication - possibilities of subjectivity - suffer slippage and conflation, becoming confused and arbitrary. This interference is indicative of the effects of a generation and society that have undermined their own sense of historicity and context (as well as the idea of the self); what remains is a profound indeterminacy in respect to notions of relation, love, the expression of that love, and particularly for men, notions of masculinity, authority and responsibility. This Wilkins represents in fiction (through examples such as the above) where contexts bleed into each other and readings slip and conflate, leaving only interference. In this state of affairs - a state of transgression - something like violence, abuse, aberrance or neglect are strong possibilities. This seems to be Wilkins' point.

---

[17]The reference to Tess is explained by Tim's memory of how his sister would read the Hardy novel to him at bedtime, but there seems more to this conflation than that. The tendency here is to connect Tess's misery and her rape with the suggestion of interference and sexual transgression connected with Candice and her father.

The context of "interference" that Tim dwells on is one of the "nastily sexual", and it is Tim's memories associated with this word, his sister and the "deviousness, sadness [and] tragedy" connected to the memory of her that is the "precious cargo" Tim does not wish to "pass on". The actual "precious cargo", the little masters, are what bring these memories back to Tim. The little masters are the hidden artefacts of Tim's familial history and as such are connected to the period of Candice's death and the father's 'madness'. It is the return of the little masters that brings Tim's private history back to him now and triggers the replaying of those contexts surrounding the word "interference" and the relationship between Candice and the father.

This replaying of context is conducted by Mrs. Whittemore on the occasion of the passing on of the little masters and, as caretaker of these items, she acts in the text as something of a historian. Her retelling of the events following Candice's death and the father's destruction of the family's precious items are like a revelation of hidden history. Like the little masters themselves this history is also something that has been kept under covers. Mrs. Whittemore begins Tim's private history lesson thus:

> Candice was, you will understand, his favourite. Fathers and Daughters. He did not know what to do [after her death]. He had a few things put away, in safe keeping. Items the family had had for generations. Only your mother knew of them. One day she discovered he had removed these things from their safe place and was harming them (229).

Whether or not the relationship between the father and daughter (his favourite) is transgressive, we cannot be sure. Certainly there is enough "sadness" and "tragedy" in losing a daughter to leukemia to prompt the father's "going mad" (230), but again, it is in the details of his destructive behaviour that we find "ghostings" of the sort to throw "interference" (and the "nastily sexual") into Tim's head: thus we read Candice as one of the precious items belonging to the generations of family that the father has removed from the "safe place" (the family) and "harmed". This word "harmed" suggests action committed against another living being, not an inanimate object, and the secrecy with which the father proceeds with his destructive and aberrant behaviour matches the secrecy of the supposed transgression. There is also the matter of Wilkins' rather allusive and elusive symbolism present in the image of the "vase [...] which he [the father] put inside a pillowslip and tapped into tiny pieces with a hammer" (229).

However, the most problematic ghosting of sexual transgression in Wilkins' fiction lies in the relationship between Adrian and Daniel, though this is something really only

present in two passages in the novel. The first of these passages provides us with an image which, but for the names of those involved, is ostensibly post-coital:

> At some point during the night Daniel had got into Adrian's bed. When Adrian woke, the boy's body was stuck to him. He shifted and their skins unpeeled. Where they'd been joined there was a moist patch of pink heat down Daniel's side. Adrian then discovered that his neck had stiffened painfully: Daniel's head had been sharing the pillow. And he remembered the sounds that had come from him (332).

The above details could quite easily belong to a different category, not that of a father and a son, but that of two lovers.[18] If we were to "change the names" (*L.M.*,195) then the passage would become unequivocal.

The point Wilkins is making is one about contingency; about how any act or "gesture" in the postmodern climate can be rendered "ambivalent, any thought uncharitable, any action half-done" (*L.M.*,30); anything and everything is freighted with contexts - often contradictory - that ramify readings, confusing and complicating even the most seemingly obvious or harmless of situations. Wilkins' point is to present in the writing the same situation faced by the exhausted subjectivities he records in his fiction; characters who because of an inculcation of loss and transgression have not the capacity to structure context or continuity sufficient to let "little facts [...] stand by themselves" (*L.M.*,8). The tenderness (a little fact) of the above passage is risked therefore by the interference of contexts and contingencies that the dominant postmodern subjectivities of Wilkins' fiction are unable to untangle. Like the progenitor figures of Wilkins' fiction - the grandfather, uncles and fathers - the predominant generation Wilkins records experience contingency as though they themselves were present on the battlefields, in the concentration camps or under the bombing raids, and like these other, older men, they too are unsure about selfhood, about relationships, and about how to structure or speak of things like love, tenderness and empathy. What we have here is like a thematisation of interference; an almost deconstructive approach to the notion of interference that sees it enacted as a suggestion of sexual interference as well as contextual interference which is also textual (or readerly) interference.

---

[18]The evocativeness of this passage is assured because of the care we assume has been taken in recording its intimacy. This scene tests the assumption of this care, deliberately, I feel, as the writer is well aware that these bodies, if nameless, would most certainly have been involved in sexual activity.

More immediately, Wilkins' thematisation of transgression has the purpose of pointing out the boundaries we place on readings, but also the boundaries placed on intimacy and readings of intimacy. A second quote, very much like the above, points to this through its threat of transgression. Again Adrian and Daniel are involved and again the language seems overtly sexual:

> They knelt together in the damp garden, hidden from the voices which now filed past them [...] and they felt swollen with their secret, so fervid in their forced calm, their absolute quiet, that slowly, they tipped together, fell inwards almost without impact, until they were each other's motionless, heated soft supports (365).

The passage is certainly intimate; in fact, it is one of the most evocative pieces of writing in the novel. The question raised by this moment of intimacy between father and son is about the point where intimacy becomes confused and/or sexual, and moreover, how this intimacy can be represented. This seems to be the boundary Wilkins is pushing against.

In the chapter prior to this one I spoke about the state of exhaustion (an exhaustion of context and affect), and how this was a condition of the epistemic break situated at the end of World War Two and felt crucially in assumptions about narrativity (indeed, meta-narrativity) and representation. In this chapter I have expanded on these notions, especially on the effects of the war. What I will say is that the exhaustion discussed previously is revealed now in the confusion over intimacy that I think these two quotes suggest as a strong theme in Wilkins' fiction. Moreover, just as I have been arguing the pattern of inculcation in these novels as a transmission of transgression, they also involve a transmission of exhaustion: an "inherit[ance] of the trauma" (*L.M.*, 235), as Tim says at one point. As a result, we are able to tie this back in with the "history lesson" with which I began, and which is seen as the utter exhaustion felt by a progenitor generation. Another character in *Little Masters* comes to the conclusion that "in the end history humiliated everyone" (147), and her point is about the form history in these novels takes; a pattern revealed and reified in the familial form of inculcation.

It is this force of inculcation which provides in Wilkins' novels for the dominant form of history or, more accurately, the representation of exhausted history. It is for these reasons of exhaustion that Wilkins' presentation of subjectivity is one based on the problematic and uncertain boundaries of masculinity, tenderness, empathy and intimacy, including the intimacy we assume to find between a father and a son. The question Wilkins seems to be asking and, in fact, problematising with the appearance of such

passages as those discussed in this chapter, is how do we recognise, record or represent such intimacies in this postmodern, post-meta-narrative age? This is the question I shall return to more directly in my chapter: 'Metafiction or, "Getting Caught in the Act"'. Before that, however, it is necessary to conclude with what has been a conjecture into the postmodern subjectivity dominant in Wilkins' fiction. To do this, as I will argue, is also to analyse the construction of Wilkins' postmodernism as both notions are inseparable from what is the focus of my next chapter, language.

Aphasia, Narcissism and the Postmodern Subject.
Part I: Aphasia.

Early on in *Little Masters* there is a scene in which the effects of the inculcation and impedimenta I have previously discussed are demonstrated once again on the subjectivity of a fourteen year-old boy. The scene involves a machine called a "Gravitron" and its attendant (the fourteen year-old). In this scene Wilkins provides a diagram for the relationship between what I shall soon qualify as an aphasic subjectivity and the force of "impedimenta" which, in this instance is associated with the force of gravity.

The Gravitron is a ride at the trade fair Adrian and Daniel attend and consists of a metal cage that is raised and spun with those inside harnessed to the cage. The fourteen year-old attendant is "too young" (34) for this adult responsibility. He should, like his contemporaries, be riding the Gravitron instead of operating it. Like the individuals discussed in the previous chapter who are 'weighted' too soon with adult concerns, the attendant here too is lost somewhere behind the authority and responsibility that have been thrust onto his immature frame. The attendant smokes a cigarette in an attempt to confer some credibility on his sense of authority, though the cigarette is quite obviously a prop stolen from the adult world. It is his 'commands' however, that give him away. His speech, short though it is, foregrounds the sort of aphasia *Little Masters* continues with and which *The Miserables* explores more fully. We note in the following extract the 'otherness' of the language (this is not a fourteen year-old's language) as well as its cumulative breakdown and the eventual "crushing" defeat it prefigures. As the attendant delivers his 'learnt' instructions we note the demise of the facade of authority:

> no objects are to be thrown while the Gravitron is in operation, ... if you have any loose objects on your person they must be handed in now or secured about your person by means of, say, a pocket or something. Put everything in your pockets. You got to remain in your harness while the Gravitron is in motion, okay. Especially you two little shits (33).

What is evident from this speech is the tenuous relationship the attendant has with this imposed authority and its language. What begins with formal tones and learnt adult phrases is by the end of the speech completely undone. We can see where the narrative supplied by an adult slips and the anxious, context-deficient teenager is exposed.

Inside the spinning Gravitron Adrian is "pressed thin as a tile" (33) to the side of the cage while Daniel along with a few other children manages through timing and what seems a combination of audacity and intuition to achieve a kind of poetry of movement as, unharnessed, they float inside the cage as it slows and quickens. In effect, Wilkins is here offering two readings of the childish subjectivity, the first of which, embodied in the Gravitron attendant, demonstrates the effects of the burden of an imposed adult narrative. Like those characters subjected to the familial "history lesson" this child is 'grounded', kept down, out of the Gravitron by a form of inculcation; he is impeded by the foreign context of adult concerns. The Gravitron attendant represents the aphasic possibilities of subjectivity that Wilkins' texts connect to the process of inculcation. However, it is in the figure of Daniel that a second possibility of subjectivity is displayed (Daniel, as I shall later explain, belongs to a group of characters in Wilkins' fiction who we can refer to as 'little masters'). Inside the Gravitron, and in contradistinction to the attendant, Daniel achieves a freedom of movement - a loosening of the restraints and a denial (even if only fleeting) of the 'gravity' we associate with the attendant's grounding.

In his treatment of the Gravitron attendant Wilkins fuses the expression of a linguistic disassembly with a crisis of identity. The attendant's linguistic demise illustrates his unsuitability for the context of authority placed on him; the boy appears "out of his context".[1] The attendant, like the majority of characters in Wilkins' fiction, lacks an autonomous/self context for the reason that the development of such a context has been problematised by the usurping presence of a pre-established 'adult' context; the attendant's linguistic demise is indicative of a lack of self-context sufficient to structure and use the context (or metaphor) of authority given to him (supposedly) by an absent adult. Thus, of the attendant, as well as the majority of characters I refer to as exhausted subjectivities, we can say that what they suffer from is "context deficiency". However, a sense of the interface between language and subjectivity is heightened when we learn the attendant's name is Knox. Here the pun is helpful in suggesting the intrication of identity, language and the child's being 'kept' or knocked down. "Knox" also suggests the attendant's fall in language, an experience translated into the empirical world when two older boys push the attendant over after they have ridden the Gravitron.

---

[1]Just as does the American in *The Miserables* (42) who, like the attendant, is also a product of inculcation; having suffered a suspension to the maturational processes of childhood, he appears as an impression of "overworked, overtired youthfulness".

What we have here is a corroboration of Wilkins' construction of postmodernism, since in his observation (through the above pun) of the intrication of language and identity (or self) Wilkins is noting what Patricia Waugh has herself seen as the condition of postmodernity: "the dissolution of the self into language".[2] What we will see in the following pages (and chapters) is that aphasia, as it is related in both of Wilkins' novels, is a metaphor not only for the subjects' relationship to the postmodern, but also for the construction Wilkins makes in his texts of a dominant form of postmodernism.

Primarily, the Gravitron episode represents a continuation of the inculcatory forces previously discussed though now manifested in language as aphasic disturbance. Although the sense of a "context deficiency" would seem to be the product of inculcatory forces that undermine the development of the autonomous subjectivity, it could also be argued that there has at some point been experienced by a pro-genitor generation such a problematising of selfhood[3] and context that in fact it is a disturbance of contexture that lies at the heart of the form of inculcation both novels record.

* * * *

In discussing aphasia the first distinction we should make is that which Roman Jakobson[4] makes between the metonymic and metaphoric poles of language. As Jakobson saw them, the metonymic is a mode characterised by contiguity, while the metaphoric mode is one that is characterised by substitution. Aphasia occurs when an imbalance exists between these tropes or when one is prioritised over the other. For my part I am mainly concerned with the function of the metonymic pole and more specifically, its malfunction. We call this a "context deficiency" or "contiguity disorder", and for myself it is this which shapes the relations of most of the characters in Wilkins' fiction. The lack of context and the subsequent problematising of contiguous relations with others and with the self is arguably Wilkins' central theme.

---

[2]See *Practising Postmodernism/Reading Modernism.* Edward Arnold: Great Britain, 1992. p.64.

[3]As Niall Lucy points out, language and the unconscious are the two primary "candidates" that signify the end of "liberal humanist theories of literary production" (1) and the idea of the masterful (authorial) self. Instead of the 'person' or 'individual' we now speak of the "subject" knowing that as constructed selves we are both "subject to, and subjects of" (1) language and the unconscious. See *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction.* Oxford, U.K.; Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1997. Wilkins' fiction provides both of these contexts - psychoanalysis in *Little Masters* and subjectivity/language consciousness in *The Miserables* - and with the references both texts make to the Second World War both texts are, in effect, grounded and informed by arguably the establishing conditions of postmodernity.

[4]See Jakobson, Roman. "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Linguistic Disturbances", in Jakobson and Halle, *Fundamentals of Language.* The Hague: Mouton, 1971.

"Context deficiency", or "contiguity disorder" as generated by a subject's inability to use effectively the metonymic pole of language, is revealed in the failure of the subject to construct metonymic (contiguous) chains of thought. They cannot, as Jakobson has defined metonymy, construct a "poetry of association by contiguity, of movement within a single world of discourse"[5]. Contiguity disorder sees the subject become overly dependent on the metaphorical pole of language to shore up their perception of 'reality' as coherent and contiguous. As such, the subject becomes dependent on similarity to sustain discourse - they substitute metaphors where they need to perceive metonymies. In this case "to say what a thing is, is to say what a thing is like" (Lodge, 78). Where metonymy is governed by the relation of contiguity, metaphor is built on substitution and so where a subject is context deficient they are confined to the substitution set of language; they cannot combine. What results is that the aphasic, context-deficient subject begins to make metaphorical mistakes, making substitutions that exhibit "no deliberate transfer of meaning" (Lodge, 78) instead of combinations.

In the session with her analyst Robert, Teresa's aphasia becomes closely associated with this making of metaphorical mistakes when Robert picks up on a particular word she has used. Robert asks, "[w]hen you talked about visiting the refugee camp back in New Zealand you used a word [...] it was finally what affected you most, do you remember? It described a process" (23). Teresa remembers the word "substitution", and this is the word Robert is looking for.[6] It is substitution, then, as it describes the "process" of metaphor, that has, as Robert says, "affected" Teresa the most, and we recognise this form of metaphorical substitution as that of the 'narrative' inculcating system of family. Teresa is an aphasic figure because of that inculcation, and this is evident in the "metaphorical mistakes" that as a self-confessed "conduit" (*L.M.*, 19) she is susceptible to. Teresa's metaphorical mistakes are thus those made through her assimilation (forced or otherwise) of others' metaphors, others' contexts.

Similarly, Healey's aphasia is also revealed through his making of metaphorical mistakes, and again we note the relation between the substitution of others' metaphors

---

[5]See Lodge, David. *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature*. Edward Arnold: London, 1977. p.73.

[6]For Jakobson, substitution is to the metaphoric pole what combination is to the metonymic.

with the process of inculcation instanced within family.[7] For this reason it is perhaps not surprising to see Healey enact through his various ascents, "counter-movements" and returns, his father's metaphor of "[c]irculation and ascension" (147). John A. Lee's *Children of The Poor* provides the governing metaphor/narrative of Healey's adolescence - that of the thief - though it is more the grandfather's fondness for this particular novel that assures it a place in Healey's subjectivity. As we note, faced with the prospect of intimacy, the disclosure of his 'true' self is conflated with the retelling of this metaphor: Healey hopes for a moment of intimacy with Joanna in which to share with her his secret life of crime and thus secure her affection.

If we see Teresa as context deficient - unable to construct her own 'meaningful' metaphors - then Healey is another for whom the only way he feels he can talk about himself and access his subjectivity is through the substitution of others' metaphors. Louise, Healey's wife, prompts Healey to realise this when, with a certain wearied 'look', she makes it clear to him that "[t]hese stories have nothing to do with you"; as a result, Healey reflects on his habit of "hiding behind the senseless details of others' names" (125).

Further to this issue of substitution the aphasic (suffering from contiguity disorder) uses similarity and likeness (metaphorical tropes) instead of contiguity in an attempt to re-order experience. Thus Healey orders his 'library' not on the context of author or subject, but on the colour of the books' spines: "[s]ometimes he was excited with the find of an essential book in a red jacket, which he pictured nicely breaking up the line of black, or with a white-spined classic to interrupt the run of green" (159). The books are desired as much for their image as for their content, and this is consistent with the experience of the aphasic for whom objects, as indeed the self, when decathected of their meaning and context, become increasingly superficial. For Healey the books are almost fetishised objects; they represent only their own materiality. Healey's cousin embodies this sort of loss of meaning when he appears at the interment, reformed by his parents. As Healey notes, the cousin is only surface, "extravagantly composed. The hair, the suit, the

---

[7]Indeed, at one point in *The Miserables* Healey seems to make this connection when he considers how "it was absurd to hold to the notion that his whole life might be arranged around such a device, and yet he could scarcely disown such distortions" (43). The wording is important here: "device" refers to metaphor or familial narrative, while "disown" suggests these "distortions" are familial. Such is the intrication (and inculcation) of metaphor within the familial paradigm that to dismiss such "distortions" and "device" is, it seems, tantamount to a radical break with family. Primarily, this is what Healey's cousin tries to achieve; breaking the pattern of metaphor by breaking away from the family.

polished shoes ..."(80), and exists in exclusively denotative language: "'I'm good now', 'I'm quite thirsty', 'I have a degree'"(92). The cousin's effort is to 'fix' language; to have it as purely declarative, though, his "relentless recording of the immediate present" (92) belies a deep-seated anxiety about context and identity.

In practical terms the aphasic subject struggles to communicate with the formation of sentences or "the combination of linguistic units into a higher degree of complexity" (Lodge, 78). This "higher degree of complexity" as it signifies either sentence or narrative organisation is something Healey, as the central organising consciousness ("author") in *The Miserables*, is troubled by. To this end we note the struggle Healey faces whenever compelled to make "meaningful" utterance. We note his silence in tutorials and his frustration with the inadequacy of his 'New Zealand' speech to the international students in the United States as well as that sense of retraction present in the moment of longed-for intimacy with Joanna in which, with the "terrible words [...formed...] in his sour tasting mouth" (160) he fails to relate the story of his secret "thieving" self; the language with which he had anticipated conjugating the relationship.

In many respects Healey's anxious inability with language and relationship is relevant to both Wilkins texts and is centred on a preoccupation with definable and discrete beginnings, middles and ends. Without context, there is no shape or contiguity to discourse which, in turn, becomes opened to the indifferent flow of language. It is to this sense of the amorphous (present in language) that, in Wilkins' texts, the aphasic's response is to seek a 'height of observing' or panovision in which a complete representation or metaphor of the world is discovered. Such a vision is what Healey seeks though never finds in his continuous scaling of new heights. Beginning with the child's sense of the heightened perspective associated with the "citadel" of the grandfather's knee, Healey begins a "false life of climbs"(43) which eventually culminates with his rejection, from the height of the Ferry poop deck, of what he recognises as his "terrible position of false observing" (44)[8].

---

[8]In a sense, Healey's desire for this "height of observing" reveals a conflation of the hierarchical structure of family and a longing for the sort of vision and authority connected with the "monumentality" and omniscience of the grandfather. This is evident when, at the races, Healey spies the grandfather through a pair of "opera glasses". Healey has the impression that the grandfather is staring back, "as if, with the opera glasses trained in reverse on the eyes of the boy looking up from the public enclosure, he could now see magnified the image of his grandson spying on him, causing Healey to suddenly look away"(176).

Nevertheless it is this anxiety for the whole - all parts given - picture that sees Healey racing from window to window in his parents' home trying to put together the view of the harbour. Healey is attempting to restructure the contiguity of the landscape split by the material framing of the windows. Healey's anxiety is like that of a photographer committed to creating a montage of a single scene through the application of many individual photographs. The frustration here is with the disjuncture between fragments (photos and frames) where edges ("tortured stuff"[9]) do not properly match up. Similarly, then, this is the kind of frustration we expect Mr. Hodge in *Little Masters* (66) to feel as a result of his "relentless" photographic recording of his deceased daughter's former home.

The amorphousness of the aphasic's experience is registered by Healey when on the inter-island ferry he experiences at the mid-point of the crossing a kind of "hysteria". Here the ferry's passage is symbolic of Healey's movement in language, from the context provided by a "beginning" and the presence of a visible shoreline (through which a sense of passage can be gauged), to the mid-point, where there is "no sight of land" (12), only the open sea which offers no markers or contexts (an island or landmark, for example[10]) with which to orient oneself. Thus the mid-point represents an experience of the amorphous; a kind of purgatory for the context-deficient. Healey's response to this state of suspension is to fill it with language: observation, guess-work, lists. Like the aphasic, Healey's response to the perceived lack of context at the mid-point is to substitute this linguistic list-making in the hope of coming up with something coherent. What he ends up with is, as he recognises, only "inventory":

> On this outward voyage, he retreated below decks and did everything he could to avoid noticing the ways in which the mid-point, no matter how smooth the sailing, seemed to have affected everyone on board. That old woman, he thought, only wants to ask about the salad and no one pays her any attention. A girl can't do up her laces while her mother

---

[9]the quote is taken from the passage describing Healey's address to the international students, a speech Healey can only properly begin after he discovers aerial photographs of New Zealand.

[10]Similarly Healey is disoriented and lost in "directionless" (52) Christchurch which, unlike Wellington, offers no visual cues to aid orientation. In terms of aphasia Wellington offers the pedestrian the 'context' of its landmarks, its tall buildings and, in particular, its hills. In Wellington you "only had to look up" (53) to know where you were. Christchurch, in comparison, is like the mid-point: flat and amorphous. Indeed in Healey's progress around Wellington we note the connection between language and city as walking becomes metaphor for enunciation. Wellington is its own metaphor of human effort revealed in its "spatial strategy" (55), it "emblematise[es]" its status as a "place of government"(55). Healey connects Wellington's architecture with "moving articulation" (50) and indeed the movement Healey makes in and around Wellington is crucial to the evocation of memory and the writing process - the articulation - behind Healey's 'novel'.

> is watching. The purser walking around, his head in the air, a button missing. No toilet paper! The inventory signalled a kind of hysteria familiar to him from other voyages (13).

Here are metaphors (representations) that do not connect; they are fragmented images taken from the cafeteria in which Healey is sitting. There is no regulation of these images and Healey's observations slip randomly from one to another. The passage is meaningless but for the communication of its own disorder, this slippage from detail to detail, the absence of conjunctions (devices of continuity), and its lack of a contextually derived meaning.

One of the problems faced by the aphasic of this order, and revealed in their experience of amorphousness, is their inability for repression or "deletion". One of the reasons that they make metaphorical mistakes is that they are not able to delete or repress the range of (arbitrary) metaphors present to them in the construction of coherent meaningful relationship. This is due to the fact that they do not have the context from which to judge the relative 'meaning' of this relation. However, we can talk of this capacity for repression/deletion because linguistics has taught us about the way language has of sliding incessantly from signifier to signifier since there is no signified which is not also a signifier itself. As one theorist has pointed out, though, "this does not mean that in the pragmatic course of our lives we never exchange what functions as meaning. But it does mean that anything which functions as meaning does so on account of repression".[11] This means that the possibility that a signified could function as a signifier has to be repressed. Thus we come to have a "meaning effect" when we delete the production of other meanings. Moreover, the ability for combination, for structuring "metonymic chains", depends on the capacity for deletion which as Lodge (though firstly, Jakobson) points out is a faculty resident on the metonymic pole of language. When context is present, so too is deletion. Metaphorical mistakes like those Teresa and Healey are recorded as having made, occur when a subject is unable to make such deletions, and when this is the case what we observe are signifieds constantly slipping under the signifier. As such, what remains for the context-deficient aphasic is a process of substitution governed by likeness and seemingly random associations. For this reason Healey's editorial page is notable for its incongruous placement of adverts, its "odd [...] juxtaposition[ary]" (30) sense. Similarly, this sort of aphasic disturbance extends to describe the kind of emotional detachment we observe in Healey, observing the gathered

---

[11] See Lucy, Niall. *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction.* p.29.

members of his family as an "inventory" of flesh: "a certain chin, a thickness of the female calf, a foreshortening of the male neck"(9). The effect in fictional presentation of this aphasia sees the production of lists or inventories characterised by fragmentation, and in many instances this is what we recognise as postmodern fiction.

Fredric Jameson talks about such fiction and experience of fragmentation when he writes about the schizophrenic experience of time. Schizophrenia, says Jameson, can be understood as present in the "breakdown of the relationship between signifiers".[12] Drawing on Lacan, Jameson like Wilkins attends to the intrication of language and subjectivity and describes this relation in the experience of time. Thus the schizophrenic is also the context-deficient aphasic[13] whose experience is

> an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence. The schizophrenic thus does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the "I" and the "me" over time (119).

For the schizophrenic/aphasic, adrift from an adherence to an organising context,[14] signs, words, objects and the self become only like another surface as language becomes increasingly literal and material. As Jameson says:

> in normal speech, we try to see through the materiality of words (their strange sounds and printed appearance, my voice timbre and peculiar accent, and so forth) towards their meaning. As meaning is lost, the materiality of words becomes obsessive, as is the case when children repeat a word over and over again until its sense is lost and it becomes an incomprehensible incantation. [...] [A] signifier that has lost its signified has thereby been transformed into an image (120).

In Wilkins' texts this "image" quality - language made into its own surface or spectacle - finds expression through the aphasic and the metaphor Wilkins produces of "materiality"

---

[12]See Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in *The Anti-Aesthetic*. Hal Foster (ed.). 1983. p.119.

[13]As Jameson suggests, Lacan considered schizophrenia as "essentially a language disorder". For this reason I substitute aphasia (as I have made use of it) for Jameson's use of schizophrenia. Moreover Lacan, as Jameson points out, links schizophrenia with the process of "language acquisition", suggesting that "psychosis and, schizophrenia, emerges from the failure of the infant to accede fully into the realm of speech and language"(118). While Wilkins does not present psychotic level aphasics, his depiction of aphasia is as generated through a failure of accedence from a familial/paternal structure and so continues in a thematic sense Lacan's thought.

[14]The importance of context in the production of meaning in light of the slippage of signifiers is made clear by Jonathan Culler when he writes that though "meaning is context bound, context is boundless".

itself. Material, especially clothing, thus becomes, in Wilkins' texts, the surface by which language and subjectivity (identity) are reified.

Language and the 'self' for the aphasic become divested of meaning to the extent that they are experienced as a literality or materiality. Thus we attribute aphasia to Healey when he conflates the idea of "himself" - "the persistence of the 'I' and the 'me'" - with his jacket:

> A cream-coloured winter coat with fur on its collar - without which, he believed, people would be unable to recognise him. He begged his mother [...]'[a]nother boy might get hold of it!' he pleaded, feeling the same sense of invasion as when he came across someone who had 'his' first name" (12).

Similarly, Adrian in *Little Masters* as a child loses items of clothing on purpose so as to involve others in the search for them. The clothes represent the 'idea' of Adrian - his identity - and the searches provoked by Adrian serve to render Adrian a subject of attention, making him seem 'real'.

In both cases it is a contextual insecurity which creates on the part of the aphasic a "slavishness to context"[15]. Because they are unsure about their own context, they must rely on objects and experience in which context is already provided. The jacket, for example, provides Healey with what he takes to be his context, and so in order for him to perceive the world as meaningful, stable and coherent, his tendency is to fix language and subjectivity to something concrete, something material. Nowhere in either novel is this notion of the aphasic's dependence on materiality so well investigated as in the woollen jersey episode of *The Miserables.*

As Jameson has noted, the word or the sentence, like the individual's notion of selfhood, become increasingly literal in the experience of the schizophrenic (and aphasic). So it is then that when Healey's brother cuts through the back of the woollen jersey in front of him, he is interrogating not only notions of identity and how things cohere - the "business of wool" (63) - but also language, and how we are constructed within it. Healey's brother is testing his intuition about the falling away of things. He is

---

[15]A "slavishness to context"(Jakobson) is then what describes the cousin in *The Miserables* and his statements like: "I have a degree". The context is here that supplied by his parents who have 'rescued' him from his attempt at self-definition or what they refer to as the "hellish vortex". Living only through the context provided by his parents the cousin is reduced to using dead language.

curious about the way things like the links in the weave of the wool bind together; his curiosity is thus also that of the aphasic confronted with an impression of contiguity. The brother cuts the links, and when this new feeling for falling away is manifested, it causes a murmur to pass through the assembled children. This commotion bubbles to the front, where the Headmaster's inquiry; "what's this" is meet facetiously with "a ripple effect sir." (61) The answer is, it seems, deliberately disingenuous, but also reflects a dawning 'word consciousness,' an over-attentiveness to the literalness of language which demonstrates a similar "falling" of words away from their design, their context. It is this link between words and their contextual meanings which is severed by Healey's brother's scissors. The sense of literalness present to this exchange is seemingly re-stated by Wilkins when with the denuded schoolboy's complaint, "'[h]e cut my bloody jersey in half, he did'" (62) Wilkins has the Headmaster reply: "Language!" (63). It is, presumably, the swearing that the Headmaster is objecting to, but such is the display of literality here that it is language itself that is at issue. In a wider sense, though, it is the condition of a postmodern world where, bereft of context, language and selfhood have become material - little more than surface effects.

Indeed, the construction of subjectivity in this condition has become like the construction of (postmodern) fiction. This is, after all, what Jameson and Lodge are talking about when they talk about schizophrenia and aphasia, the intrication of the experience of language and fiction with the experience of being-in-the-world and how it is through language that we experience being and time; and this is what Wilkins observes through his presentation of a postmodern world where 'fictional worlds' (worlds constructed entirely through language) have become conflated with worlds outside of fiction.[16]

As I have said, writing and speech that demonstrates metonymic aphasia often appear as 'lists', and in many respects where such language use takes the form of fiction, it is fiction we read as postmodern. Indeed, Lodge equates fiction built primarily on contiguity (the metonymic pole of language) with realism, and fiction built on substitution (the metaphoric pole) with postmodernism. A fiction like Wilkins' that (as I have argued) explores gaps in contiguity and issues of fragmentation, randomness and contradiction will be that which exhibits a contexture deficiency or contiguity disorder; it

---

[16]This is the point Patricia Waugh makes when, in effect, she discusses the relevance of metafiction to the condition of being in the postmodern world. I discuss this in my chapter on metafiction.

will appear aphasic. On a basic level postmodern fiction represents an aphasic awareness of language.[17] What we can say is that Wilkins' novels explore (thematise) metonymic aphasia and, as such, at times read as 'postmodern'.

However, in so far as these novels also provide moments of empathy and tenderness (metonymic possibilities) then they also offer us a more modernist/realist reading. Though this may be the case, Wilkins' texts remain postmodern in that as like Lodge suggests, these novels remain metastable, oscillating between poles of language (metonymic and metaphoric). In this situation of contingency, both metaphor and metonym are possible; both empathy and narcissism are possible; and constructions of both a postmodernism of exhaustion (and aphasia) are as possible as a postmodernism of "mastery" (and contiguity). In this way Jakobson's work on aphasia and the poles of language can be seen to provide a structure and theoretics to Wilkins' depiction of postmodernity.

Part II: Narcissism.

In so far as we accept the primacy of language and the view that we are "subject to and subjects of language" (Lucy, 1), then we see the link between an aphasic - context deficient - consciousness and the narcissistic subject. Indeed, the transition from a language disorder to a psychological structure or manifestation is, as Jameson (and Lacan) have indicated, seamless, and is one more reason why we can make a case for the continuity between Wilkins' two texts since the second, *Little Masters*, takes what is true of *The Miserables* - language disorder - and re-casts it as narcissism. Thus the context deficit of the aphasic finds a correlation in the narcissist's lack of "self-images"; the aphasic's contiguity disorder finds expression in the narcissist's inability to perceive otherness and establish empathetic (and metonymic) engagements.

---

[17] In many respects we have every right to imagine the aphasic Healey as a 'postmodern' author (in fact it is because Healey is an author figure that he dominates the discussion of aphasia). In so far as postmodernity as outlined by Lodge corresponds to the sort of aphasia Healey demonstrates, we can see postmodernism's "suspic[ion] of continuity" (Lodge, 231) as Healey's suspicion *about* continuity. Indeed such is the case I have been making in relation to Healey's metaphorical mistakes (as revealed in examples such as his editorial page, his library and other occasions where a word like "jockey" becomes confused amidst a flow of potentially "boundless" contexts) that these are all clues to the sort of postmodern/aphasic fiction Healey may have been capable of producing.

Much of my use of narcissism comes from a reading[18] of Heinz Kohut and is based on his understanding of narcissism as a maturational process, a "configuration" natural to, and occurring within, the developing self. For Kohut, narcissism takes the form of two structures. The first narcissistic configuration Kohut refers to as the construction of the "grandiose self": this is an attempt to create the "perfect self" and represents a "developmental stage where everything good, pleasant and perfect is experienced as belonging to the inside and everything bad as belonging to the outside" (60). The second configuration is what Kohut terms the "idealised parent imago". Here, the effort is to "restore the lost blissful state [the experience of omnipotence] by imbuing an outside 'other' with absolute power and perfection. Attachment to the perfect 'other' restores the child's sense of wholeness and bliss" (60).

As Kohut argues, these configurations are crucial to the development of the self and eventually are transformed through the process of maturation. Thus,

> if the 'early narcissistic fantasies of power and greatness are not opposed by sudden premature experiences of traumatic disappointment but gradually integrated into the ego's reality-oriented organisation' [...] then the ego will be able to make adaptive use of the sense of power. The grandiosity eventually becomes integrated into the ego as the healthy enjoyment of activities and successes, accompanied by a feeling of confidence (61).

At this point narcissism becomes transformed into the qualities of "creativity, transience, empathy, humour and wisdom - all transformations that occur as the original narcissism matures" (62).

However, the sort of narcissism recorded popularly by writers such as Christopher Lasch[19] is, from Kohut's perspective, the result of a breakdown or disruption (the result of a trauma) of the narcissistic process. As such the disrupted weakened self is recognised as the narcissist.[20] For myself, the narcissist is the figure whose maturational processes have been interrupted and in fact suspended, and for whom the transformation of the narcissistic configuration, as outlined by Kohut, is similarly suspended. Figures retain their narcissistic structures because they have not finished the business of their

---

[18]See, Siegel, Allen M. *Heinz Kohut and the Psychology of the Self.* Routledge: London and New York, 1992. For all further references to Kohut see Siegel.

[19]See *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations.* W.W. Norton and Company Inc. New York, 1978.

[20]The 'narcissist' for Kohut is perhaps more accurately understood as the subject whose "narcissistic structures are in a disordered state" (Siegel 59).

narcissism; they have not finished the developmental processes involved in the production of the self (or what I have also referred to as the subjectivity and, in relation to aphasia, context) associated with childhood and adolescence. As I have suggested in the chapter: "The History Lesson", this is due to processes of inculcation and forms of impedimenta demonstrative of disruption and transgression. Moreover, the suspension of maturational processes involved in the development of self and subjectivity and the correlative failure of the subject to transcend their narcissistic configurations is caused by the experience of trauma.[21] In Wilkins' fiction this trauma takes many forms and varying degrees of transgression, and though the greatest expression of this trauma lies situated with a progenitor (war) generation, forms of inculcation present in the depiction of family have seen this trauma emblematised as the crashing in on the childish subjectivity of world-weary concerns belonging to adult consciousness and narrative.

The experiences of Russian gulags or Nazi bombing raids are two specific examples Wilkins gives as evidence of usurping and displacing impedimenta - indeed these are adult concerns that deal explicitly with displacement - and it is concerns like these that are at the root of what emerges in Wilkins' novels as a description of the narcissistic tendencies of a given society, a handful of families, and a generation or so of individuals. What I want to stress here is that the suspension of the narcissistic processes is commensurate with the suspension of the developing self (context or subjectivity) and results in characters who struggle to properly become adults. For this reason we come across characters in Wilkins' novels who have yet to properly transcend the influence of their parents. Such characters, as I have mentioned in "The History Lesson", exhibit a kind of "overworked, overtired youthfulness" (*T.M.*, 39), appearing "infinitely, prematurely old" (*T.M.*, 28), and Healey himself considers how

> he had developed as an adult several afflictions which he might properly have grown out of had he suffered from them when a child. Growing into them as a man of thirty he found their effects more difficult to shake off, as if, finally stricken by these infant diseases, he was suddenly prone to the delayed virulence of all those years of incubation (12).

Here, the sense of suspension is referred to by Healey as an "incubation", but what these thirty years in which Healey has not finished the business of childhood represent is the suspension of a narcissistic state from which he is yet to mature. In so far as narcissism is

---

[21] In *Little Masters* Sister Veronica makes this connection between trauma and subjectivity in her own way when she talks about the child who is thrown "into the thick of things"; here, she says "[t]here is a trauma of sorts. One's identity can ... wobble" (220).

related to the maturational processes of the child, then we can also say that in Wilkins' fiction the presence of 'incomplete' individuals - narcissists - has much to do with the legacy of family.

Thus it is a moment of violence, framed by the context of family, that for Adrian can be seen as the trigger for the onset of his 'narcissism', though, in Kohutean terms, this is the moment of the suspension of his 'narcissistic configurations', the suspension and prolonging of his adolescence. This moment of suspension comes for Adrian with a fall into a creek bed and with the breaking of his leg which seems to occur later when his older, heavier cousin, Stefan, falls on top of him. The moment is freighted with the frustrations and bitterness of an adult world personified in the disgruntled figure of Stefan. The second fall is the important one, as there is the suggestion of an amount of volition and resentment in Stefan's clumsiness. Thus, this is a moment loaded with the history of the two cousins and, in particular, the context of Adrian and Con's relationship, of which Stefan is envious. Indeed, Stefan's bitterness is the context that suggests the 'volition' significant enough to disturb Adrian from the preterite 'innocence' and unchecked progress of his childhood. The fall and following events represent Adrian's fall from adolescence. Adrian is at this point brought to a consciousness of the adult world, a context as familiar in Wilkins' fiction as it is familial, of dislocation and detachment, bitterness and loss. Too soon his childhood is over and he is weighed with the symptoms already manifested in the over-burdened figure of Stefan. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Adrian only forgives Stefan years later in London.

Narcissism can be seen to come out of a doubt about selfhood and an exhaustion of strong self images. A character like Healey, or David, or Tim for that matter, experiences a narcissistic approach to the world because of a solicitous "I" or "me". It is for exactly this reason that David in *Little Masters* wishes to become Polish. Uncertainty about the self, subjectivity, context and identity, is what generates a scepticism about the existence of others (and the quality of otherness), and indeed about anything beyond the experiential or empirical. In effect the narcissist is separated - existing in what Healey recognises as a state of "natural detachment" (9) - from others and society and exists fenced in by their consciousness.

In many respects narcissism, like solipsism, is best summed up as "the problem of other minds":[22] whether or not others have interior selves and whether it is not irrational to conclude that they do. Moreover, narcissism "casts doubt upon the existence or accessibility of a mind-independent world" and as such "leave[s] us with no lifeline to the presence of others" (838).

The question of a "mind-independent world" is, then, what the young Healey is suspicious of in his thinking that

> the result of any significant sports event - a cricket match or a soccer game - was not fully present to him, or verified, unless he had been watching over it. He believed a result which he hadn't expected might well have been different had he been there at the time when it was decided (86).

Similarly, an older Healey experiences an anxiety about the harbour view from his parents' house. Thus Healey

> realised this moving from window to window had caused him to become anxious [...] he had the feeling that in the moments he was away from the windows the city might somehow lose its beauty. Every time someone turned away from the windows, he felt, ridiculously, that he needed to move to fill the vacant spot (86).

The outside world, and hence the world of others, is felt by Healey to exist - and remain beautiful - only when he is perceiving it, and it is this sort of solipsism which underwrites the central assumptions of narcissistic subjectivity Wilkins' fiction makes. The question: "do others have inner li[ves] of the kind that makes a subject a person[?]"[23] is a question that registers with a figure like Healey, and is what we observe in his incredulous (and postmodern) responses to the notion of otherness.

The primary relationship establishing the narcissistic subjectivity in Wilkins' fiction is revealed in *The Miserables* in the relationship between the grandfather and Healey. Essentially, Healey's early relationship with his grandfather sees a blurring of the boundaries of otherness. Thus, on this question of otherness we see that the "sacred

---

[22] See, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy.* Ted Honderich (ed.) Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. p.838. The reference here is actually to the related condition of solipsism, though it is my decision to view solipsism as a part of the narcissistic subjectivity. It seems pointless to separate the two terms in relation to Wilkins' fiction but for this admission that a solipsistic view of the world - "the problem of other minds" - is subsumed within the narcissism Wilkins appears to record.

[23] *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy.* p.838.

bond"(15) Healey feels exists between them is based on the conflation of Healey's developing subjectivity with that of the grandfather. Such is the force of this conflation that it reveals itself in Healey as a desire almost to merge with the grandfather. Healey's desire or feeling for closeness is thus also a desire to "force his way in" (15). The narcissism here mirrors that which Healey later diagnoses in his friends and contemporaries as young lawyers and professionals; those who "could fix themselves in the image of their fathers" (105). But Healey is also shaped by this compulsion to see himself in his (grand)father and this is a reason why, as I noted in the last chapter, Healey adopts the metaphors of his father and grandfather. A compulsion such as this is what Jules Henry outlines as "unconscious emulation". Henry writes:

> When the superego consists not so much of conscious ego ideals but of unconscious, archaic fantasies about parents of superhuman size, emulation becomes almost entirely unconscious and expresses not the search for models but the emptiness of self images. (Lasch 85)

'Unconscious emulation' is thus central in Wilkins' fiction to the development of the narcissist and, to some extent, it is what is described by various characters when they talk about the "parrot[ing]" (*L.M.*, 116) and "copy[ing]" (*L.M.*, 221) of generations. We note too in Healey's case the presence of a parent of "superhuman size". As I have said, this relationship between Healey and the grandfather can be read almost as an archetype for the paternal relations Wilkins records in both texts. Characteristically, it is from this type of relationship that the narcissistic structures present in Wilkins' characters are situated and suspended. The continuity of this archetype seems to be something Wilkins would have us note and indeed many of the characters - both fathers and children - are to some extent interchangeable. Tim, for example, could well be an older (pre-maturational) Healey, while Tim's father, the Judge, represents an embodiment of much of the authority that the grandfather assumes. David's father, like the grandfather, is also, we note, an engineer. Indeed, as I shall later illustrate, interchangeability is something heightened in the relationship of Healey and the American. What we observe in these paternal relationships is a narcissistic modelling process in which we are able to glimpse possible triggers: causes or traumas sufficient to disrupt the developing subjectivity of the child. Thus in Adrian's relationship with his father, we note the father's sense of reserve and detachment, and the physicality of the man is reminiscent of the "monumentality" of the grandfather. Stan (Adrian's father) is also a veteran (so to speak) of a history that includes the invasion of his home land, incarceration in concentration camps and immigration to a foreign and distant New Zealand. Like his brother Con, Stan has experienced enough

"triggers" to suggest the effect of a disruption in the relationship with a child. Con makes this more apparent in a conversation with Adrian in which much of his distance from and neglect of his son, Stefan, is given some basis.[24] In many respects Con represents a generation which Lasch targets as implicated in the creation of a narcissistic culture, a generation for whom:

> Since 'the society' has no future, it makes sense to live for the moment, to fix our eyes on our own 'private performance', and to become connoisseurs of our own decadence, to cultivate a 'transcendental self-attention'.[25]

Of veterans we must also include Jilly's father, a "private man", her relation to whom Jilly finds a replacement for in her marriage to Tim, another "private man" (*L.M.*, 260). David is quite clearly shaped by the influence of his father and in particular the effects or trauma associated with his parents, who "divorced nastily, unexpectedly when he was fifteen" (*L.M.*, 152). Emily is perhaps an exception here as her relationship with her father stands apart from these others in that it is not so apparently demonstrative of a "modelling" in line with either the "grandiose self" or "idealised parent imago" configurations of Kohut's narcissism. Emily's father is, however, described as a victim, and this leads Emily to wonder if she herself is not therefore a "victim of a victim" (*L.M.*, 189). There is the suggestion here, shared with the other relationships mentioned above, of the presence of some trigger sufficient enough to have problematised the normal maturational processes. Whether a "victim" of a "kind of ... amnesia" (*T.M.*, 36)[26] on the part of a father or of some other act of transgression, something recorded in Wilkins' fiction has interrupted a generation (or so) of childrens' progress and maturation from the narcissistic state.

Thus we find the thirty-year-old Healey still performing "unconscious emulation" (or what Lawrence Thornton[27] describes as "modelling") on the ferry, returning from his

---

[24] See chapter 3, "The History Lesson"

[25] See Hougan, Jim. *Decadence: Radical Nostalgia, Narcissism, and Decline in the Seventies.* New York: Morrow, 1975, in Lasch. *The Culture of Narcissism* (p.6). Indeed, the sentiment of this quote is something that is expressed by Healey with his phrase, "connoisseur of the fugitive", (48) a metaphor for a society/generation of individuals who, like Healey himself, live a-historical, a-subjective lives, sealed within their narcissistic world view. Thus the narcissistic subject finds expression in the figure of the "fugitive".

[26] As I have said, the problematizing of the maturational process comes in varying degrees through Wilkins' depictions of family. Thus the grandfather's daughters talk of this "amnesia" and neglect in relation to the way he behaved to his family while, at the other end of the scale, we observe the suggestion of physical and sexual abuse present in the relationship between Candice (Tim's sister) and her father, the Judge.

[27] See *Unbodied Hope: Narcissism and the Modern Novel.* Blackwell University Press: London, 1984.

grandfather's funeral. In the discussion Thornton makes about the narcissistic consciousness in fiction, it is not surprising to see that he implicates the linguistic process of metaphor in the structure of a narcissistic configuration. Moreover, such narcissism is the product of the same aphasia I have been describing in relation to Healey and *The Miserables*.

Indeed, what we see here is that context-deficient aphasia (the substitution of metaphors and the making of metaphorical mistakes) describes the way in which a narcissist perceives and constructs their 'world'. Moreover, in aphasic language use we find a metaphor for the narcissistic self, as well as the processes of repetition and inculcation that self is instanced by. We find an expression of this when, in *Little Masters*, Jilly addresses Emily and Adrian:

> To me, you two, for instance, do not look lost. Are you lost? No. You're away from home but you're happy. Are you happy? Of course. And if not, you're at least comfortable. If not comfortable, you're at least sure of yourself, at ease. Or if you're not even at ease, you're at the very least here, present. With us (318).

The effect here is comical as Jilly, inculcated within her discourse, approaches nonsense. Here, the technique of the rhetorical question highlights the sense of inculcation, as there is no consideration given to response. In effect her monologue turns on itself, fulfilling its own breakdown from a position marked by possible insight and argument to the assertion of the obvious. It is an extraordinary performance compelled only by a narcissistic self-referentiality. Jilly is in effect talking to herself. This is language and language use that exists and is generated only for its awareness of itself as form. Jilly's speech continues, despite the fact of its nonsense, because of its own sense of internal structure and symmetry: one clause after another calls for its own reflection and as these clauses continue in this mirror fashion, sense is lost and only the surface effects of "signs on a page" or a voice in a room remains.

In the context of Wilkins' fiction Jilly's speech is representative of the processes of repetition and inculcation enacted through the families Wilkins depicts. For this reason Jilly's utterance is similarly as empty as Healey's cousin appears to be. Aphasic language use and, in particular, its heightened sense of materiality are thus bound, in Wilkins' texts, to the experience of selfhood. Thus, the cousin can also be described, like Jilly's speech, as nothing more than a 'sign on a page'; nothing more than a fiction.

Thornton observes this connection between (what we can think of as) the production of fiction and the experience of the narcissistic subjectivity when he describes the 'modelling' process the narcissist undertakes in order to construct subjectivity:

> The "finished artist" sees the model on the far side, and through an act of mind closes the distance separating them. At this moment, they *think* that they become exactly "like" the model, having shed their old identity through a kind of psychic molting [...]. Once they possess the model, they live out their conceptions of its qualities. This is where the "sense of reality is lost" because the characters now exist solely within a matrix of language which has only a referential relation to reality; that is, *metaphor* replaces concrete *experience* as the characters' chief goal. Thinking of themselves in the language of Romance, in which signifiers refer only to other signifiers within the realm of received ideas, their common desire it to bind their lives to that series of images and codes they bless with the status of originality.

Thus, the narcissist through a kind of transference onto the model becomes a character; a fiction like Healey is a character in 'his' own novel.

> In this way ...[such]... characters enter into their conception of the real only after they have enclosed their lives in quotation marks. What is involved here is very much like the exchange that takes place in metaphorical substitution (30).

What is involved here is then also very much like the relationship to language (and hence fictional production) the aphasic shares with the narcissist - the making of metaphorical mistakes and aphasic descriptions (fiction) that Wilkins sees as indicative of the dominant mode of postmodern subjectivity.

Unsure about the content of their selves - the limits of their subjectivities - such characters like Healey experience the self and the world as formless. This formlessness is what Healey registers at the mid-point of the ferry crossing, and here the formlessness of the passage represents the uncertainty and the amorphous nature of Healey's subjectivity. Because of the lack of shape or boundaries present to the experience of the formless self, others are not experienced as autonomous from the self; 'otherness' is never interrogated or differentiated. As Lasch says, "the narcissist cannot identify with someone else without seeing the other as an extension of [them]self, without obliterating the other's identity" (86). As a result what we see in the meeting between Healey and the American is a fluid exchange of details and specificities in a conflation (on Healey's part) of their separate identities.

Thus at the mid point and at the height of Healey's experience of contingency, the "sense of reality is lost" (Thornton) and all that properly remains is language or, more specifically, metaphor. Healey as the aphasic and narcissist is thus responsible for making substitutions based on similarities and likenesses; thus, his narcissism is indicative of the making of metaphorical mistakes. In the previous chapter we observed Healey at this moment of the mid-point experiencing a kind of "hysteria" manifested primarily in language through his list making or "inventory". Thornton records this as the narcissistic process whereby "*metaphor* replaces concrete *experience*" (30). With this in mind we view Healey's interaction with the American aware of the sort of modelling Thornton outlines where what is felt by the narcissist to be real is in fact felt as such on the consequence of its being "enclosed [...] in quotation marks" (30). The question we may ask here is one that points with increasing relevance to the construction of a Wilkins metafiction: is the American anything more than a 'sign on a page'?[28] Is this character any more than another of the author's (in this case, Healey's) metaphors?

These are questions the narcissistic condition present in Wilkins' novels raise; how in this postmodern environment do we attend to otherness, and to what extent are our own 'readings' of others any more than, or different from, the fictions we make from day to day? The American, we notice, does not exist independently of Healey's conscious construction of him, indeed the two men (like the other characters Healey meets on the ferry at the mid-point) begin to merge; difference between them breaks down as the "distance between them" (30) closes. Both the American and Healey are thus "out of their context" (42) and both are like 'boys' living in a suspended state of pre-adulthood; the American with his "boyishly full hair" (40) and Healey, with his susceptibility to "infant diseases" (12). Healey, true to his narcissistic purview, takes the American as an object, and in doing so conflates him with himself. "[H]ad the man really said all that" (19), considers Healey at one point, thinking about the American's "proposition"; and later, Healey's confusion over who said what, and about where his participation begins and ends, is clearer when he notes, "one of them - could it have been himself? - was saying something about Ivy League schools" (42). The distance and difference between the two

---

[28]Healey's experience of the American brings together the issue of his narcissism and the extent of his nascent (aphasic) 'authority', where his inability to imagine otherness is revealed in the creation of a metaphor rather than the observation of a self. As such, the American remains a fiction, a 'character', who as Patricia Waugh says in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (1984) "are signs on a page before they are anything else" (56).

men is collapsed even further when they begin to share the physical effect of the American's tight tie knot, which Healey feels at his own throat.

In so far as the narcissist is capable of taking the self as an object,[29] then all the characters Healey encounters on the ferry can be read as "selfobjects"[30] demonstrative of Healey's narcissistic configurations. Lasch, like Lacan, Freud and Kohut, connects narcissism to the condition of "misrecognition" of otherness. As Lasch says, "narcissism blurs boundaries between the self and the world of objects" (35), and thus the omniscience the narcissist may feel is produced by the inability to differentiate the otherness of those around them. In the heightened state of narcissism brought about by the indeterminacy of the mid-point no otherness exists, only metaphors of the self.

Thus, at the mid-point of his ferry-crossing narcissism is all Healey has left. He splits himself with the American who, like the jogger and the child on the poop deck, functions as a construction within Healey's narcissism; they can be seen as examples of Healey's object-ego relations or metaphors of the self. Indeed, in so far as Healey recognises what he calls his "wrongheaded impulse to see in the plight of others no more than the reflection of his own condition" (222), he is aware of his tendency towards a narcissistic state.

The suggestion that those on board the ferry are little more than the metaphors of a character who, as Thornton says, has "enclosed their lives in quotation marks"(30) is strengthened by the associative links - likenesses and similarities - these figurative substitutions (the other characters on the ferry) appear to offer. The child on the poop deck thus stands in for Healey's remembered childhood, indeed the child is representative of Healey himself and the text documents a link between the two in the form of the fainting game Healey remembers playing like the child he is watching. The "exposure"

---

[29]Thornton quotes Freud on this point, referring to the way the "ego can take itself as an object" (39). What results is a splitting of the ego and a relationship described as "a relationship of the self to the self in which one's self is regarded as though it were another person"(39). Thus the "American" becomes a mirror of sorts for Healey: of his split ego. We usually think of the narcissist as creating mirror images of the self and in Lacanian terms (as Thornton points out) this mirroring leads to the creation of a persona which like Kohut's "grandiose self" becomes a configuration in which "self-love compensates for a weak self image"(39). Thornton notes that "Lacan observes that when the child sees itself within a totally unified world [through the creation of a grandiose self] the rejection of reality is both natural and inevitable" (39). This, then, is also the point at which narcissism becomes pervasive.

[30]"Selfobject" is Kohut's term and describes the relationship where the object (parental figure) or object equivalent is not separated from the self.

the child appears to suffer from as a result of this 'game' is indicative of the narcosis - some form of 'over-exposure' to something other than the maturational processes of childhood in Healey's early life. Indeed, this is arguably the reason why Healey has yet to fully transcend the condition of his immature, narcissistic structure.

The Jogger is quite obviously a conflation of the grandfather and Healey himself, and this conflation is appropriate in so far as the young Healey has never properly differentiated the grandfather from himself. Like the grandfather, the Jogger is an athlete, and like Healey he shares a fascination with acronyms. Both the Jogger and the spinning child, like Healey, are represented as inculcated within the familial metaphor of "circulation and ascension", as all, by varying circumferences, inscribe circles through their movement on the poop deck. In the last image from the ferry we find all three pressed together, and this seems enough to suggest a metaphorical "sandwiching" (228) of the tenses the three represent: the child being representative of Healey's past, Healey himself (and the American) the present, and the Jogger who represents both the past and - in the fashion Healey imagines of his grandfather triple-jumping into the future - the future (*T.M.*, 48).[31]

The sandwiching embrace is also, it seems, symbolic of a revivification not only of the child but also the child in Healey. In narcissistic terms, this reviving effort sees an end to the 'incubation' and suspension that have prevented Healey from moving on with his life, maturing through his narcissism and becoming responsible for himself and his text. The American, as I have already observed, is little more than a reflection of Healey himself. It is significant that it is the American who eats Healey's lunch, and that he has the charge of Healey's possessions; he looks after Healey's grandfather's scrapbook. Apart from this translation of physical possessions, we note also the presence of biographical details relevant to Healey's life but present in the American's 'story'. Healey, of course, has been to America and both have attended Ivy League schools, but from the position of Healey's solipsistic purview we can see the American's plan to fall from the ferry as a fiction closely informed by and related to Healey's experiences and memories of his cousin. The cousin's fall, prefigured by his record descent of Mt. Edgeware, into what his parents refer to as the "hellish vortex" (83) of Sydney, sets up a context for the

---

[31]Typically for Healey, and this is also indicative of his aphasia, the child, the Jogger and the American are split into a triumvirate of beginning, middle and end. Healey even prefaces this at the beginning of the ferry's passage when he imagines "the leaving, the mid point and the arrival" (14).

American's own proposition. For this reason the American is as "close as a cousin" (41) as both men are in essence in search of a new life, a new beginning. Healey shares in this desire for re-creation and, as we note, he envies the power evinced by others "towards self-definition" (193). To some extent, the American is also representative of Healey's own desire to fall[32] from the back of the ferry and start anew, in fact, to break away from the patterns of circularity and repetition that have held him in thrall.

So far the purpose of this discussion has been to show how narcissism is a psychological expression of a condition of language (aphasia), and how both aphasia and narcissism can be seen as postmodern conditions symptomatic of the collapsing of differentiation between the concepts of language and self. Furthermore, I have been interested to show how Wilkins uses a model of language (Lodge's polar typology) and, in particular, aphasia (linguistic imbalance) to perform a critique of postmodernism structured as a theory of dominance. In Wilkins' fiction this critique takes the form of an observation of narcissism and aphasia as well as of the exhaustion of a society skewed upon the dominance of metaphor and an incapacity for constructing metonymic relations.

That Wilkins uses a model of aphasia to encapsulate this condition of generational, cultural and subjective dominance speaks to the amenability of using linguistic structures to articulate supposedly phenomenological and experiential concerns of selfhood. Here, then, we can see the relevance of a concept like metafiction which, in simple terms, addresses 'reality', or what Patricia Waugh refers briefly to as "human nature", by addressing itself to language. The suggestion implicit here (which I pursue in the next chapter) and which I think Wilkins pursues, is that in fiction is contained an aesthetic and metaphor for being-in-the-world. What the last two chapters set out to show is how, through a use of postmodernism's own 'languages' - specifically, contingency, irony and metafiction - Wilkins is able to address the notions of an aphasic postmodernism by recording moments of continuity and context, postmodern empathy and tenderness.

---

[32]Indeed, Healey's desire to fall finds a context in his wish to exchange places (to substitute) with the deceased lightning-strike victim known as the "lightning boy" (167). The desire for this substitution is here confused with that of arousing feeling. Healey wants to be the focus of the recognition and emotion the image of the "lightning boy" elicits in his peers. However, quite apart from the narcissistic drive for self-recognition, Healey's wish to exchange places with the "lightning boy" bespeaks a desire to be struck down from the height of his position of "false observing" (44). In a sense this is a response to the vertigo Healey suffers from in being inculcated in his "false" quest for new heights and omniscient views.

"Getting caught in The Act": Metafiction and The Aesthetics of Empathy.

As I have been suggesting, Wilkins' novels are read as postmodern largely because they are populated, and dominated, by subjects and relationships which exhibit the exhaustion, narcissism and aphasia (as well as a-historicity and a waning of affect) we commonly associate with the 'postmodern condition'.[1] However, Wilkins' engagement with postmodernism does not end with this observation of a dominant subjectivity since these novels also record moments of empathy and tenderness; moments (if also contingent) of clarity, coherency and engagement. Moreover, the suggestion these novels make is that these latter possibilities - essentially of empathy - are possibilities of the same postmodern condition as those of exhaustion.

If we were to be simplistic about it we could say that Wilkins' conjecture into the postmodern condition - and more specifically, the possibilities of subjectivity and relationship this conjecture structures - is based on two primary impulses: the first is what this thesis has so far been concerned with, the observation of a dominating and usurping mode of postmodernity Wilkins represents as forwarded by processes of inculcation and instanced by moments of transgression. The second impulse is what these last chapters are concerned with, the creation within the text of a postmodern aesthetic which, in response to this condition of dominance, returns a treatment of the postmodern that endorses contingency and plurality (or otherness) but also empathy.

Wilkins' fiction thus attends to a transition in the construction of postmodernity from a "theory of dominance"[2] (expressed in the texts as aphasia: a theory of linguistic dominance) to an aesthetic of metastability (contingency) and immanence. For this position we have only to consider the figure of Healey (an author figure, as I also have suggested) who recovers from his aphasia - essentially through a revelation of otherness and empathy - and is able to recognise context, build continuity and structure selfhood through attending to the possibilities multiple vocabularies offer.

---

[1]Indeed, the impression of postmodernism Wilkins' texts make is corroborated by Edmund J Smyth in *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction* (9) when he describes the postmodern as "any creative endeavour [exhibiting] self consciousness, reflexivity, fragmentation, discontinuity, indeterminacy, plurality, metafictionality [...] decentring, dislocation [.]" All of these elements are present in Wilkins' fiction and are expressed primarily as they relate to conjecture about subjectivity and relationship.

[2]See Lodge, David. *The Modes of Modern Writing*. London: Edward Arnold, 1977, p.80.

Wilkins' treatment of postmodernity thus correlates to David Lodge's notion that postmodernism can be seen to represent the point at which the pendulum swinging throughout a history of twentieth century western literature between metonymic (realist) and metaphoric (non-realist) modes - "theories of dominance" - has "speeded up to the point where all possible modes of working between the two extremes are now simultaneously available to a single generation of writers" (52). Wilkins, I would argue, belongs to such a 'generation' of writers, and in his fiction this generation of authors is represented by those figures I shall come to discuss as 'little masters'.[3]

Primarily, however, this ability for empathy and "mastery" is one that is made possible by, and understandable through, the concept of metafiction. In short, metafiction as a postmodern mode explains the condition of postmodern life. At once it captures the reverence of language, "the dissolution of the self into language"[4], and the primacy of the aesthetic, while also allowing for a politics (actually an aesthetics) of connection and contiguity (metonymic qualities): the means by which we may engage with others and experience tenderness and empathy. Moreover, metafiction as it appears in Wilkins' novels spans both poles of language. It encourages and presents a form of realism[5] while, at the same time, drawing attention to the constructed nature of any 'reality'. What we can say is that metafiction captures the interface between the experience of selfhood (the possible interchange in relationships of tenderness and empathy) and the aesthetic as it is revealed through the role playing, affectation and constructed metaphors of subjectivity. In short, metafiction is a mode whereby, as I shall show, you can have your metaphor and your metonym too.

As I have said, metafiction attends to the postmodern observation of the interface of fiction and 'reality', and William Gass recognises this as the condition of everyday life where "we select, we construct, we compose our pasts and hence make fictional

---

[3]Healey's progress from aphasia to the revelation of "fullest context" (236) also places him as a 'little master', and moreover, his progress is parabolic of a Wilkins fiction that stages a return to a notion like empathy built on the use of both the metaphoric and metonymic poles of language.

[4]See Patricia Waugh, *Practicing Postmodernism/Reading Modernism.* Edward Arnold, Great Britain, 1992. p.64.

[5]As a point of interest, theorists like Deleuze and Guattari point out that something like metafiction is irreducibly mimetic and, thus, realistic, since although "[t]he world has become chaos, [...] the book remains the image of the world". See Lucy (188).

characters of ourselves as it seems we must to remain sane".[6] Gass's statement finds corroboration in Patricia Waugh's claim that we now occupy "roles" rather than "selves", and it is this notion of life as a constructed reality, an "artefact",[7] that underlies what I see as the sensible claim metafiction (and hence a postmodernism such as Wilkins') has on realism and metonymic expression.

Waugh makes this claim clearer when, in effect, she collapses the distinction between 'reality' and the fictional world further by describing how metafiction signifies a "more general interest in the problem of how human beings reflect, construct and mediate their experience of the world". Waugh continues,

> metafiction pursues such questions through its formal self-exploration, drawing on the traditional metaphor of the world as book, but often recasting it in terms of contemporary philosophical, linguistic and literary theory. If as individuals, we now occupy 'roles' rather than 'selves', then the study of characters in novels may well provide a useful model for understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels. If our knowledge of this world is now seen to be mediated through language, then literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely through language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of 'reality' itself.[8]

This understanding seems *a priori* to Wilkins' fiction and is something that is ostensibly acknowledged when Wilkins himself, writing an essay about writing,[9] evinces what amounts to a theory of metafiction in explaining the value of affectation. In short, what Wilkins offers the reader (and writer) in this essay is a further understanding of this interface between language and reality; between fiction and selfhood. Moreover, what the following quote outlines through its metafictional aspect is the aesthetic Wilkins' writing is, as I see it, predicated on. This is an aesthetic which allows for postmodern representations of empathy and tenderness. For myself, it is the recovery of affect in concert with Wilkins' use of metafiction that underwrites the success of the novels' empathetic turn:

> In a recent interview, film director and actor Sydney Pollack talked about the signals that a director is always unconsciously giving to actors on a set. The actor, Pollack says, is terribly disappointed if, during the filming of a scene, the director is staring at a monitor

---

[6]See Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life*. 1970, p. 128

[7]Gunter Grass is quoted by Waugh as saying that "reality is an artefact, that [...] does not exist until it is made and that, like any other artefact, it can also be made well or badly ..." in *P.P/R.M.* p.53.

[8]See *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. Methuen, London and New York, 1984, p.3.

[9]See the essay "Opening the Bag" in *Mutes and Earthquakes, Bill Manhire's Creative Writing Course at Victoria*. Wellington, Victoria University Press, 1997, p.69.

> instead of watching the actor 'live'. Of course it would be fairly disastrous if the director/actor model was applied to the teacher/student relationship in a creative writing class. Yet there is something very touching about the film actor's need to be seen in the flesh - some basic human desire to be paid active attention to - which has a counterpart in the writing class. Here the writer too, if he or she is serious about it wishes for something more than just applause, hopes for a reading which *catches him or her in the act of writing* [my italics].[10]

What is illustrated here is the way in which a partial revealing and a "remarkable intimacy"(69) can be structured through performance and affectation or what we can also think of as the use of metaphor. What is "touching" and where we locate the "remarkable intimacy" (empathy or "tenderness") Wilkins talks about in this essay, is where we are caught "in the act" of writing, structuring; performing the roles of our everyday lives. Metafiction is the mode in which this quality of attention, or what Healey considers as "giving himself away"(193), is endorsed. Empathy, tenderness and the hope for contiguity are thus situated in the gap or distance between the constructed performing subject - their fictions and metaphors - and what we think of as the self.

The point about Wilkins' comments in "Opening the Bag" is that they frame the aesthetic present in his novels. Wilkins' commentary on writing practice, combined with his fiction, brings us to the consideration of metafictional writers who, as Waugh points out, all "explore a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction".[11] Exploring a theory of fiction is thus equivalent to exploring a theory of relation and affectation; life outside of the text as Waugh has said. Metafiction becomes a metaphor for human interaction since it acknowledges, as Waugh points out, that we exist in the world through language and thus are ourselves writers, constructors and consumers of various fictions, artefacts and performances. But metafiction (through its self-conscious attention to its own constructions) also allows for the sensation of a rupturing of these surface fictions: a "getting caught in the act".

However, my argument weighs not so much on the surface signs of a demonstrative Wilkins metafiction, but rather more on the way that a conception of metafictionality is present in both the form and thematic content of these novels. Certainly, there are elements of Wilkins' fiction which do observe aspects of a 'traditional' metafictional presentation and, these I will begin with. But it is the thematic engagement of Wilkins'

---

[10]See "Opening the Bag", p.69.
[11]See Waugh. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction.* p.2

writing with metafiction and the extent of what amounts to a kind of cultural absorption of a postmodern self-consciousness, evident in his depiction of character, that is my focus. As I shall show, in foregrounding his use of the concept of metafiction Wilkins is providing a means whereby a postmodern aesthetics of relation and empathy may be resumed.

Perhaps the most immediate signposting that the fiction is built on a metafictional consciousness is evident in the reluctance of both novels to begin. Both texts have 'false starts'. The prologue of *Little Masters* thus opens with the question, "...where are we starting today", while a little later Teresa confesses an anxiety not only about beginnings but also concordances: endings in particular. Her anxiety is about narrativity and her wariness is shared, it seems, not only by other characters but by the author as well. We attribute this wariness to the force possessed by narrative for falsely shaping where there is no shape; for a kind of corruption or violence committed to un-narratable experience. For Healey, narrative is associated with the imposition of beginnings, middles and ends and the narrative legacy, situated with his grandfather, of omnipotent vision or what he later refers to as "false observing"(44).

Similarly, Teresa's hesitation is due to her experiences with the forms of narrative and inculcation that she, like other adults in *Little Masters*, has been in thrall to through the familial system. Thus Teresa says:

> I'm just a very bad starter all round. Strange because twist my arm and usually I'm okay. Actually I think it's because I'm worried about ends, about outcomes, what this is all leading to. I'm worried about where we might end is the thing. (8)

Thus, narrative logic, for Teresa, ends with "tears" and with these tears, remembrance of narrative processes manifested in Nazi invasions of Poland and Russian gulags. It is these narratives in particular (passed on through generations through inculcation) that form the basis of the impedimenta Teresa seeks therapy for. The prologue of *Little Masters* is, to some extent, a quite deliberate staging of deferral as the novel's narrative does not begin until the twentyninth page.

The opening of *The Miserables* also commits to a process of deferral, and this text never in truth starts as much as it simply resumes. As such the reader is thrust into the middle of a conversation. Indeed, the novel begins as though on an elision, with Healey's Aunt's exclamation: "Strange things at such times, Brett" (7). Immediately we are thrust

into direct and present speech and a line of intrigue (the mysterious notion that the grandfather has been getting lighter in his casket) that is not returned to until the twentyfourth page when Healey finally responds, "how's that?". This eschewing of narrative order is thematised in this text that shuttles back and forth through a geography triggered by Healey's recollections. Primarily it is the notion of grand narrative - that sense of order as if revealed from on high, of a "beginning" a "middle" and an "end" - that plagues Healey; and while he has, in his past, desired such narrative omnipotence, it is a kind of vision that is, as he comes to realise, untenable.

Moreover, what we can say about *The Miserables* is that it does much to debunk traditional forms of narrative construction. In rejecting the 'false position of observing" Healey is also eschewing several other forms of narrative construction that have been motifs of Healey's childhood and adolescence. Thus, it is not only the omnipotent gaze of the grandfather Healey dismisses but also his "life of climbs" (43), the paternal metaphor of "circulation and ascension" (147), funicular (circular) motifs: cable-cars, ferry rides, a child's circular fainting game, as well as notions like that of the "path": "the existential symbol which concretises time" (75). In *Little Masters* the parodying of narrative motif is continued with the failure of Emily and Adrian to consummate the promise that their convergent twin narrative lines seem to suggest. This 'failure' of narrative convergence is then followed by the narrative contrivance of bringing almost the entire cast of characters together in the final chapter of the novel under the same roof.

At various times characters scattered across both texts point to and point out meta-textual questions about readings, about knowledge and about some of the processes and expectations of fiction. Again Healey is the first example that springs to mind, though this is not surprising considering that he is himself an author. That the ending of the second novel is reminiscent of "farce"[12] is, I think, deliberate as Wilkins is parodying (and pastiching) narrative contrivance, drawing attention to the manipulative potential of narrative.

The ostensibly arbitrary (of course it isn't arbitrary) arrival of a flock of sheep in the novel's final chapter heightens this sense of farce and contrivance, and the insertion of these sheep in the scene can be seen to be a performance of meaninglessness. The sheep

---

[12]John Newton makes a similar observation of this scene in his review of *Little Masters* in Landfall 192, (Spring 1996), pp. 336-340.

represent a surfeit of meaning, as though a sort of white noise, though of fleece, not static. They are the result of what we can think of as an overspilling of the cumulative build-up of the various and multiple 'readings' (and "ghostings") the novel explores and that narrative structure cannot contain. Jilly cannot help but make this clear when after considering something like the "the huge range of options available at any one point" (388), gathered like the many figures in her dining room, she voices her own and perhaps the reader's (and writer's) sense of disillusionment, conceding her 'authorial' attempts at contrivance: "I just thought there might be enough catalysts here for some sort of resolution"(398). Jilly is, of course, looking for an "end" to what both novels steadfastly refuse to supply: a "beginning".

In undercutting his own narrative constructions Wilkins is, in a sense, allowing himself to "get caught" in his writing. He also allows his narrators, as well as his characters, the possibility of getting caught through moments of openness, and we can think of this openness as a kind of divestment, but also as a kind of invitation. This, it seems to me, is the basis of the intimacy that we find in the metafiction of this writer.

For moments of intimacy (there are only a few) we can look to the opening page of *The Miserables*. The novel begins with an intimate moment: Healey and his aunt, their heads bent and pressed together sharing some secret, fanciful and affected information. It is this interaction between the aunt and Healey which sets up some of the possibilities of the tenderness that the novel concludes with. The observation by Healey of the aunt is also here responsible for the opening up of the semantic fields that will structure and foreground Wilkins' exploration of tenderness, and it is this initial observation which provides the first evidence of the metafictive context that informs both novels. Thus we observe Healey studying closely his 'performative' aunt as she bends to impart her secret:

> She was excited, her eyes wide and dry from not blinking. The lines of her neck, usually concealed in colours or loud hand-knitted scarves, now appeared so close that Healey thought of the flutes of a fan, or a contour map in its crinkly, plumbable shading, or the folds in a curtain as it is being raised (7).

In many ways this passage can be seen as integral to the development of Healey as an author figure and it can also be seen as a trigger for the process of rumination and self inquiry that follows, perhaps emblematised here in the sense of a curtain being raised, or a fan being unfurled. Indeed, the map metaphor seems an explicit reference to the movements of Healey over various terrain, be it through memory or the landscapes of his

past and present. Because Healey is also, in a sense, the 'author' of the text it is almost impossible not to read the text as self-conscious or reflexive. Metafiction thus becomes a reasonable premise for a text whose main character, as author, brings text into being merely through being conscious. Given that the novel is almost entirely a project of retrospection it is impossible to divorce reality from text. Thus in the ostensibly random associations Healey registers on seeing the aunt's neck, we read metaphors for the novel.

However, the tenderness here is located with the tender quality of the aunt's exposed neck. Her soft flesh is the real secret of the passage, not the information about the lightening of the grandfather. Thus it is the vision of something that is "usually concealed" that initiates Healey's thoughts about intimacy which shape the rest of the narrative. There is the sense of seeing the real aunt under her performative and "theatrical" layers, represented by her "loud hand-knitted scarves". These scarves stand in for the constructions and fictions that metafiction assumes to be the condition of being.

If we are looking for more signposting of Wilkins' metafictional approach, then quite apart from the treatment of narrative[13] there are further indicators which serve to draw attention to the fictionality of the fiction.[14] We find such indicators in the practice of naming or, as is often the case in Wilkins' writing, not-naming of characters. Again the point here is to "lay bare" the illusion of realism in the traditional literary sense by providing names which not only undermine the "tendency of realistic fiction to assign apparently arbitrary, non-descriptive names to character"[15] but also expose elements of Wilkins' fictional constructions. Through such a practice it is possible to catch Wilkins in the act of writing, and the result of this sees characters, at times, reduced to little more

---

[13]It must be said however that Wilkins does not abandon narrative or, for that matter, realism in his metafiction. Indeed Larry McCaffery in *After Yesterday's Crash. The Avant Pop Anthology.* New York: Penguin, (1995) anticipates Wilkins' position in relation to postmodernism and narrative when he writes about contemporary writing that, like Wilkins', has not "jettisoned [...] an interest in story, nor in 'realism', but the traditions of conventional realism - linear plots, causally related events, carefully orchestrated sequences of beginnings, middles and ends that produce a satisfying resolution - all of which were formulated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (xxii).

[14]Indeed this can be seen as one of the primary actions of a metafiction. As Waugh says, this is literature that "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to itself as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between reality and fiction" *M:T.T.P.S.F.* (2). As cues to this notion Wilkins has characters remind us about "textuality". Thus at one point Con reads Adrian's facial expression as a "paragraph" (52), while later on Adrian himself reflects on how getting information from Daniel was like "turning a page - the effort, the wait" (125). Later still we come across a sort of New Zealand literature 'in-joke' when Wilkins has Jilly reflect on the mispronunciation of her surname by Piet whose accent makes the "c" in Clover sound like a "g"; making "the bad poetry of her name - more reasonable" (241).

[15]Waugh. *M:T.T.P.S.F.* p.55

than "signs on a page". Indeed, as I have previously pointed out, this is appropriate to Wilkins' thematic treatment of an exhausted and decathected generation as well as a culture of narcissism and aphasia in which otherness is seldom perceived.

However, a name such as "Healey" seems an obvious enough pun in light of the 'healing' he moves slowly towards and, of course, knowing that Healey is also the author of the novel, the name (and its relevance to the thematic concerns of the novel) seems pseudonymic: the creation of an author writing about an author, which, of course, is exactly what Wilkins is doing. *Little Masters* shares in this naming practice and a character like Con is a good example for the reason that in his discussions with Adrian, Con can be seen to expound a theory of conversation. In brief, we can consider Con's conversation analogy as one contrived on contingency, contradiction, context and complexity.

Jilly's father, "Gray" as he is known, is another character whose name explains something of his existential situation and, more importantly, his presence in the text. At the wake Gray's mates attempt a reading of him. He becomes the centre of conjecture but, true to his name, he remains a 'grey area' of interpretation and knowledge. Indeed he is the embodiment of this uncertainty as in both his "canvassing" of different religious opinions and the attempt of the doctors to map his body, he remains a figure of ambiguity. But it is about reading that Wilkins seems to want us to think in relation to this "Gray" character. The direct speech of the mates' questioning implicates the reader who must also wonder, "What did this tell us about Gray" (259). Even, it seems, in the most clear cut cases of wartime heroism there are only grey areas. This is the complexity of vision that Wilkins wants to communicate in his representation of the 'readings' and 'writings' we perform on others and have performed on ourselves. We, the readers, perhaps not surprisingly, find ourselves in relation to the text in the same position Gray's mates find themselves in relation to his life, wondering if they could "establish a tendency here? Pattern and understanding was what they sought" (259). Thus, the grey areas the 'mates' are left to ponder are also the "ghostings" we, the readers, are left with in relation to the texts.

The Gravitron attendant, Knox, is of course another example of Wilkins' metafictional naming practice, though it is Wilkins' tendency (relevant to the first text) for not-naming that creates a similar effect of drawing attention to the surface of the fiction. In this way Wilkins illustrates breaks in his representational illusion. Such characters are, as I have

said, little more than "signs on a page", or an author's metaphors. The effect of such non-presences as those in *The Miserables* of the American, the Jogger and the Child serve to reinforce the presence of an author.[16]

In a scene such as that of the "tableau of local history" we find a condensation of the sort of metafictional practice Wilkins commits to in his texts. This is a scene we can read as a commentary on the text it is a part of. Being almost formalist in design this scene can be read as a "ghosting", almost a "baring of the device", but the fiction never goes this far as it always pulls back sufficiently to remain complex and subtle. Indeed, it is complexity and subtlety that are the point of such a scene in which the situation of reading and the relationship between representation and interpretation are translated into the image of Emily viewing (reading) the scene (text) of local history. Here we note a tendency for Emily to become something of a mouthpiece for the author as it is the question of reading practices that is addressed. Thus, Emily's interior monologue is recorded considering the suggestion of violence figured in the tableau and how:

> The longer she stood in front of the tableau, the more strongly she came to believe that this suggestion had been planted within the scene itself. You were supposed to see those ghosted movements behind the programmed ones. (95)

Emily stands in for the reader here; the tableau for the text. The "ghosted" movements she/we observe are thus those the novel itself makes. As such, ghosting becomes a metaphor for the various suggestions, complexities and subtleties of these texts.

Indeed, the sandwiching of the two terms, 'text' and 'interpretation', is what this scene stages. The scene ramifies into itself as the indeterminate 'ghostly' positions of writer and reader, text and interpretation are conflated. We match Emily's "implicated" stare with our own, implicated within the scene, as readers and producers of meaning. This scene is thus forwarded by the slippage of semantic production where representation becomes interpretation which becomes representation again. This situation of confusables finds a similarity to the position we, as readers, occupy in relation to the tableau scene, viewing what may well be "programmed" as "ghosted", and what is "ghosted" as "programmed".

---

[16] As I have already suggested in a previous chapter these characters are drawn from Healey's conditions of narcissism and aphasia.

Metafiction assumes this situation to be a reality promoted by a collapsing of the distance between self and text and the commonplace notion that the "observer always changes the observed".[17]

The tableau scene, in so far as it foregrounds processes of reading and interpretation, is perhaps only topped by the scene I have described previously as the 'post-coital' scene between Adrian and Daniel. As I have said, this scene ambiguates the relationship between Adrian and Daniel. It is without doubt one of the few deeply intimate passages of *Little Masters* (of both novels) and, in the context of the developing relationship between father and son, it signifies a level of trust and confidence between the two. Also, it is one of the few instances in either novel where we can point to a relationship, familial or other, in which two people elect the comfort of each others' presence. What ambiguates this, however, is the description of the scene, its language use and the presence of references that tie in with a context, established cumulatively throughout the novel, of transgression and possible sexual abuse.

The point of this ambiguous treatment, quite apart form the "cock-eyed guesswork"[18] it may stimulate, is to suggest something of the immanence of language and especially the slippage associated with postmodern signifying practice. The instability of 'correct' or 'true' readings shows how the possibility of a reading of intimacy can be as present in the same passage as a reading of incest. Wilkins illustrates the simultaneity of his fiction (and of language) in showing how different readings, even contradictory readings, can be present to and concomitant with each other. Primarily, this is because like the tableau scene, this one is also about reading. Thus, the passage in *Little Masters* that describes Adrian waking to Daniel in his bed [as discussed earlier in "The History Lesson"] is followed by Adrian's consideration of the "sounds" (333) and words that had come from the boy during the night.

> Adrian had started writing down these words in a notebook. This morning he would have to record 'table' from the car-ride, as well as 'some soap is okay' and 'melting'. Melting because they'd been glued together and he'd become hot? Soap because they didn't have a shower or a wash before bed? In collecting these parts of his son's uncontrollable speech, Adrian began to wonder whether there was any pattern, some overall scheme which would make sense of it. He had about ten pages of the stuff by now and nothing clear had emerged. Perhaps what he had heard were simply the audible fragments of his son's secret

---

[17]See Waugh. *M:T.T.P.S.F.* p.3.
[18]See Wilkins. "Opening the Bag", p.71.

> stories - each night a new story. His notebook was not gathering towards anything continuous, it would always remain a sampling of the vocabulary of the child's changing, infinitely various inner narratives (333).

Wilkins' emphasis here on interpretation and conjecture - attempts to read "patterns" or "overall schemes" - re-introduces the problems of the preceding (ambiguous) passage. To follow a scene as deliberately (and problematically) suggestive of sexual content as the aforementioned with a scene as overtly parabolic of reading and interpretation as that of the above, is as demonstrably metafictional as Wilkins gets. And yet, as obvious as this signposting or authorial finger-pointing would appear to be, the metafictional quality evident here is subsumed by its thematic treatment. That is to say, the point of Wilkins' use of metafiction is to show how it describes a cultural condition whereby being 'known' and 'knowing' someone (as with the whole question of relation and relationships) is involved in the question of reading.

In effect Wilkins is playing on his own capacity to generate uncontrollable fragments and signs which do not necessarily "gather [...] towards anything continuous". Wilkins' awareness of signifying practice is similar to the process of meaning production Klinkowitz outlines when he writes that to talk "about" a "thing", means indicating what the "thing is not".[19] In a scene such as the above in which 'readings' are 'staged', then what we can see Wilkins achieving here is a kind of 'return of the repressed': not only a return of repressed meanings (the "deletions" we make in saying what the "thing is not", as well as the repression of "readings" we might choose not to read) but also the return of repressed behaviour (possible child abuse) as framed by a familial inculcation of transgression. Furthermore, we can also say that what is returned in this scene is the repressed notion of intimacy. The effect of these various 'repressions' sees the text draw attention to its own processes of "ghosted movements". The point I want to make about the metafictionality of such a scene is that it becomes in the novel like a pivot point where the novel and writer achieve, and are shown to achieve, a kind of self-consciousness. Such a scene thus stands as a testament to the text's perception of itself as a fiction. At such moments we can say that the writer and their text get "caught in the act" of their writing.

---

[19] See reference to Jerome Klinkowitz in introduction to this thesis (p.2).

However, the point I want to make about the metafictional practice in Wilkins' fiction is not made merely on the demonstration of metafictional technique. Rather, the worth of metafiction to Wilkins' fiction is best revealed in his adoption of what we can think of as its 'politics' or the way in which, in both novels, metafiction represents an aesthetic. Thus, surface signs of a metafictional treatment are ancillary to the metaphor metafiction provides for a means of social relation and, for this reason, Wilkins' metafiction can be said to be ultimately subsumed by what amounts to a form of realism.[20] At this point I want to return to those notions of "getting caught in the act" and of structuring empathy on which I began; and what I want to show in the next part of this chapter is how the reader and the characters arrive at moments of intimacy, connection and empathy in these novels through a politics borrowed from metafiction.

* * * *

It is the work of metafiction that offers a respite to the narcissism of the individual, a point which Waugh makes when she says that by

> breaking the conventions that separate authors from implied authors from narrators from implied readers from readers, the novel reminds us [...] that 'authors' do not simply 'invent' novels. 'Authors' work through linguistic, artistic and cultural conventions. They are themselves 'invented' by readers who are 'authors' working through linguistic, artistic and cultural conventions and so on.[21]

The point that Waugh is making (it is a further extrapolation of Gass' insight) is that there is no position outside the discourse and performances which individuals construct and are constructed by. Waugh further illustrates this point by quoting John Fowles, who writes, "individuals not only construct their own position in the world and narrate their own histories; they are also situated within others' discourses, are characters in others' fictions" (135). It is this radical sense of situation, combined with a dawning awareness of others and others' worlds that Healey realises on reflection on his own narrative construction. In thus reflecting, he becomes open to empathy and the revelation of tenderness. Moreover, it is through an understanding of his alterity in relation to the world that his narcissism is breached. As such, empathetic perception becomes a

---

[20]Indeed, given that postmodernism is the 'given condition' and that our experience of reality has become increasingly analogous to the experience of text, then metafiction - a mode of the postmodern - amounts to a form of mimesis, a form of realism.

[21]See *M:T.T.P.S.F.* p.134.

possibility for Healey on condition of his ability to recognise difference. Thus, thinking about the various paths and streets in the world he has walked down Healey considers "what it was like for any other figure to move along the paths which sometimes intersected with his own" (111). This is the first time in the novel Healey tries to imagine 'otherness', and what results is a rumination which we can read as a fairly sophisticated summation of the postmodern and/or metafictional sensibility. Thus Healey considers how:

> [w]e assemble these random movements [...] these left turns and right turns, and imagine ourselves symbolic navigators, first-time explorers, everlasting pioneers, and then we look at this beautiful map[22] inside our heads and it is like no other country that has ever existed, though we should not fool ourselves that we have invented any of this. If we look closely we see only the faint image of our own wishes pressed onto paper as flimsy as skin. It is the mere tattoo of our pattern-mania. And still we cannot resist these relentless misreadings of our own situation, [...] (111).

In such a scene what we witness is the foregrounding of an aesthetic (this too, as Waugh points out, is a feature of postmodern writing[23]) built primarily on a metafictional premise. Indeed, here we find references to the world that metafiction describes, a world populated by "symbolic navigators": navigators/interpreters of language, metaphor and signs who are not "first-time explorers" or "everlasting pioneers" but subjects within contexts and histories who produce and are produced by the contexts and histories of others. Metafiction foregrounds the otherness and difference of constructed reality, essentially, by stressing the untenability of any one given reality. Thus we have not "invented" the world, but are invented as much by ourselves as by others. This was Fowles' point. 'Invention' is nothing more than a wish born from our desire to perceive and construct "patterns", and though, as Healey indicates, we may know this, we cannot help conducting the various "misreadings" (selections, deletions or repressions) of others and ourselves in describing our situation.

If we consider Healey's phrase "paper as flimsy as skin" we are reminded of Healey's project - the novel - as well as the notion, central to metafiction, of the inseparability of the textual, mapped or paper world of representation and the real world of those we live

---

[22]The "Beautiful map" reference provides a connection to the opening page of the novel where Healey looks at the exposed tender flesh of his aunt's neck which looks like a contour map. Even here the text is referring to itself as an artefact.

[23]"All postmodernisms foreground the aesthetic" says Waugh in, *Postmodernism, A Reader*. Edward Arnold, Great Britain, 1972. p.4.

with.[24] The "skin" is thus the surface we 'read' or 'write' on in our relations with others. Such a phrase remembers this condition and reinforces the notion of metafiction's relevance to the extra-textual world: that we live in the world in so far as we live in language and that the postmodern world, after all, represents "the dissolution of self into language".

Metafiction provides a basis for empathy since in its implication of the subject within the wider discourse of humanity (of subjects constructed by others, constructed by culture etc.) as well as its endorsement of difference and otherness, it prefaces the condition of empathy. Thus it is a vision of both contiguity (relational and social) and otherness that for Alison Landsberg distinguishes empathy from sympathy. Landsberg writes,

> [w]hile sympathy presupposes an initial likeness between subjects, empathy starts from the position of difference. [...] We might say that empathy depends less on "natural" affinity than sympathy, less on some kind of essential underlying connection between two subjects. While sympathy, therefore, relies upon an essentialism of identification, empathy recognises the alterity of identification. Empathy, then, is about the lack of identity between subjects, at negotiating distances. Empathy, especially as it is constructed out of mimesis, is not emotional self-pitying identification with victims, but a way of both feeling for, while feeling different from the subject of inquiry.[25]

Thus, metafiction is the vehicle for empathetic perception. Empathy, in turn, is the term in which we read the postmodern/metafictional situation of Wilkins' novel. That is to say, empathy presents both a form of connection, "a feeling for" someone (the basis for a social metonymy), while observing the difference of the 'other'. Of course, this is a transaction that is conducted within language and so, for this reason, metafiction is the ideal metaphor as it acknowledges the constructed nature of reality, the primacy of language and yet also, a means whereby others and difference are supported, along with the possibility of "getting caught". The metafictional concept simply states that it is through our capacity for interpretation and representation - the fictions we make - that we are able to structure continuity and connection with others, and not through some appeal to real or essential selves. The possibility of social continuity lies within the realm of the aesthetic, not 'reality', and the metafictional mode is a mode which draws attention to aesthetic practice (as indeed all postmodernist fiction does).

---

[24]But, of course, as Baudrillard teaches, (see *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983) we should not confuse the map for the territory. Indeed, as "beautiful" as this 'map' may be, "it is like no other country that has ever existed"; it is, in short, only metaphor, just as 'our world' - this map - is only fiction.

[25]See Alison Landsberg. "Towards a Radical Politics of Empathy" in, *New German Critique*. No.71, Spring/Summer, 1997. (p.82) pp.63-86.

The few moments of connection in Wilkins' novels that I shall explore next are thus notable (and metafictional) for the attention they bring to the sense of an aesthetic as well as the sense of difference they are often instanced by. What we shall see is that in Wilkins' fiction the combination of these two attentions is what produces the possibility of empathy and tenderness between characters. Moreover, what Wilkins himself refers to as "getting caught in the act" depends upon a successful foregrounding of these concerns (of difference and the aesthetic), and primarily in the novels this foregrounding is revealed through the affectations and performances of different characters.

Metafiction is thus a metaphor for the postmodern subject's capacity for existential enquiry. Where metafiction draws attention to itself in order to pose questions about its own construction and relation to the 'real' world, then, a subject's metafictional assumptions are ways by which the subject draws attention to their own constructions, and poses questions about their relation to others and the world. If as Waugh says, metafictional texts "explore a *theory* of fiction though the *practice* of writing fiction" then it is fair to say that on behalf of the individual, the concept of metafiction provides a mode whereby they may explore a theory of self and relation through what is essentially an aesthetic practice.

Thus the foregrounding of aesthetic practice (which I argue Wilkins' fiction does through its presentation of relationships) outlines the fiction's status as a metafiction since Wilkins' writing appears to occupy the same philosophical grounding that metafiction itself animates. Thus Waugh could be referring to Wilkins' fiction when she talks about the way in which metafiction:

> suggests in fact that there may be much to be learnt from setting the mirror of art up to its own linguistic or representational structures as from directly setting it up to a hypothetical 'human nature' that somehow exists as an essence outside of historical systems of articulation.[26]

This, of course, also explains why it is that Wilkins sets up his parallel discussion of linguistic structures - metonymic, metaphoric and aphasic processes - in constructing an aesthetics for relation in the "real" world. In short, Wilkins uses a self-conscious

---

[26]See *M:T.T.P.S.F.* p.11.

approach to his texts' own structures and processes of signification (their aesthetic condition) in order to articulate the possibility of empathy and engagement.

As with the definition of empathy, in Wilkins' texts it is usually a sense of difference, otherness or alterity that prefaces the moment of intimacy and connection. It is this quality of difference that is the prompt for the "getting caught" through which tenderness and empathy are revealed. The simple reason for this is that a feeling of otherness draws attention to the self and the constructions the self produces; otherness causes an evaluation of aesthetic practice.

Thus the only moment of intimacy, or at least of human engagement, between Teresa and her analyst comes when, with genuine frustration, Robert disrupts the relationship between analyst and analysand. With his outburst (*L.M.*,14) Robert becomes 'present' to the session. Teresa's use of Robert's name (something Teresa had chosen not to do in their sessions) means that his 'otherness' is perceived. Before this moment Teresa has only engaged Robert in a non-reciprocal relationship and, as such, Robert remains little more than a mirror surface for Teresa's material. However, with his outburst, Robert becomes more than the 'non-reciprocating' analyst, he becomes Robert, and Teresa's use of his name signifies her sudden perception of him as 'other'. As Robert says, "the real me" has been "flushed out of hiding by my own frustration, my aggression" (15). Though Robert has not structured this outburst (initially Teresa wonders if it may have been a technique) he is revealed (metaphorically) through a tear ("I just lost it"(15), he says) in the surface of his performance as analyst. That the two go on in this section to have a discussion about Teresa's pregnancy is demonstrative of a level of connection triggered by this moment of disclosure, though even here, there appears now to be some uncertainty on Teresa's part about which Robert she is talking to, which context is engaged: Robert or the analyst. Thus when Robert offers his congratulations on Teresa's pregnancy Teresa responds, "[n]o, really, I am" (25).

Again, it is a sense of difference that underpins the moments of discovery between Adrian and Daniel. In these moments where the otherness of the other impinges on the consciousness of the perceiver, Adrian begins to understand more about his son; he begins to feel closer to him. In Wilkins' fiction 'learning' about someone, or getting close to someone, depends on catching them out and, in turn, being caught out. So it is a sense of difference that underpins a sort of discovery when Adrian is surprised by Daniel's knowledge about donkeys. Daniel's knowledge on this topic represents outside and

foreign material, and it acts as a differentiation between father and son, triggering a form of self-consciousness and relational awareness in Adrian, who notices hesitation in his son's delivery of this new material:

> It then struck Adrian that it wasn't Daniel's uncertainty about his own knowledge that was stopping him. He was hesitant because the knowledge had come from somewhere else, from the foreign outside, from a place which the boy sensed belonged to Adrian. How could this information not have first reached his father? Why was he in possession of something which was rightfully Adrian's? The touching nervousness in his voice, Adrian thought, was due not to the fact that what he was saying was new to him but because it was new to his audience. This reversal of roles had unsettled him, yet its discovery also now pushed Daniel along. He wanted to see where his unexpected superiority would end. His voice grew flighty and high and fast, a chirp almost. (278)

Daniel is affected by his father's 'not knowing' about donkeys and it is at this point where, having in a sense caught his father out, the touching quality in his voice is heard.

At a later point in the novel we note perhaps the first real exchange of intimacy and empathy between father and son when, again, differentiation is made clear. The empathy we find here is prefaced by succeeding moments of differentiation. Thus we find Adrian standing in the foreign clothes of Tim, clothes which are too big for him and inside of which the 'mis-fit' is felt, perhaps, as something "weirdly exciting"[27]. Adrian is thus already experiencing a feeling for his alterity when he leans down to help Daniel remove his boots:

> 'I can't get these off', said Daniel, lifting one gumboot. 'Put your hand there, on my shoulder,' said Adrian. He leaned down to the gumboot. He could feel his son's warm breath on his neck, the cold of his hand pressing hard against his shoulder as he worked the gumboot loose. The sock came off too, and there was the boy's pink foot, a foot which in its breadth, in the downward curl of its toes, was quite unlike his own. Was this Anna's foot? He couldn't remember her feet. These were the sort of comparisons long-term couples could make every now and then -- measuring bits, studying the cut of an ear, how a lip was made. He was struck by a feeling of loss. His son's foot, as he held it, struggled to cover it once more with the sock, seemed merely new, scrubbed of its own history (362).

---

[27]This is how Tim is described in the country, as though in his father's suit and considering the presence of a clothing metaphor that runs throughout both of Wilkins' novels we can easily associate the sense of being inside another person's clothing as akin to experiencing a sense of alterity. This is what Healey registers at the bowling alley in the Midwest when asked to wear the bowling shoes. At this moment Healey can be said to recognise his otherness to the 'self' he thought he was, (i.e.., the thesis student). It is also the moment in which he feels 'other' to his friends and the writer (he is studying), who he now realises he is wrong about. What we can say is that moments of alterity in Wilkins' fiction bring with them moments of clarity and insight.

We note then markers of difference: the breath on Adrian's shoulder, the cold hand, that strange 'other' foot, all physical details that mark the separateness of the two. This process of othering is reciprocal, though, and just as Adrian smells his son, so too Daniel smells Adrian and the 'foreign' clothes he is wearing. It is difference then, that generates the excitement which spills over into the affectation and performance of Adrian lifting his son up and carrying him as though a baby and, at the same time, affecting 'baby talk' ("good, liddle Bubba", 363). In response, Daniel affects an 'adult' degage manner, feigning a non-recognition of his father's behaviour and instead commenting on the practical sensation of being carried around: "So. This is good, [...] I'm liking this" (363), all of which he undercuts as an affectation when Adrian, resuming his role as adult, asks him a question and he responds, "I don't know. I'm just a baby".

So if we note here a willingness for a playing of affectations (role playing and role-reversal) then we see how such play becomes metafictional when such role playing becomes acknowledged between the two: that is to say, when it is a role, or fictional self, created by the two knowing in fact that it is a fiction. An illustration of this comes with the depiction of Adrian and Daniel hiding from the others behind a bush. It is, however, the sound of his son's giggle that Adrian recognises as a performance that triggers the tenderness of the moment and the sense of catching each other in the act. Thus:

> Daniel began to giggle. The sound of it was unexpected -- was this really the first time Adrian had heard his son giggle? -- a grown-up, closed-mouth, nasally noise, a carefully muffled pleasure, and half-ironic snort to finish. It was a performance. Like the one he'd given in the barn as the milk boy. Like the one he'd threatened at the Trade Fair vacuum stand. The guardian angel had also been a performance. His son, his quiet, ghostly son, loved an audience (364).

Again, the tenderness of the moment comes with the sense of otherness as the two are 'forced' into their role by the passing others and the shared sense between Adrian and Daniel of their secret, hidden position. Moreover, this moment is present to Adrian's revelation of his son's aesthetic practice seen as the various fictions: the "milk boy", the "guardian angel". Having both "caught" each other out (after all, Adrian is here 'acting' like a child in hiding from the others) the two lean forward into each other, becoming "each other's motionless, heated, soft, supports" (365).

However, it is not only between Adrian and Daniel that a sense of otherness triggers a kind of tenderness between people. Tim and Adrian, for example, appear to experience a

kind of "comfort" together when they are both witness to the performance of the children in the barn. Tim and Adrian feel 'othered' by the children and as such are thrown together by their witnessing presence at the barn window into a relationship. Adrian considers "the odd feeling of comfort he'd experienced as they stood together" (352), while Tim feels compelled to thank Adrian for what we can suggest is a similar sensation but, nevertheless, one Tim either cannot articulate or is too embarrassed to attempt to express. The moment is one of a divestment of performance and one in which something about Tim is "revealed" to Adrian. This moment of clarity is enough, it seems, for Adrian to consider Tim a "gentle" person, and "gentleness" is a quality that here stands in synonymically for tenderness:

> Perhaps he'd thought it first as they stood at the window of the barn watching the sheep. At that moment, with their arms touching, he'd felt close to Tim. It was as though Adrian had become aware of his employer in some sense that had previously been obscured -- by his voice, his age, class, position, by his Englishness maybe. He didn't think Tim had been 'revealed' to him, or that all these trappings, if they were trappings, had fallen away and the 'true' Tim had stepped forward. He did not understand the man any better having stood with him at the barn window, yet this quality -- gentleness -- seemed right. It made Tim credible -- was that the word for it? -- whereas everything else about him had seemed outsized, doubtful (355).

There is then the sense of discovering something of someone removed from the incredible and outsized world of more information and truths, and it is an abstraction: "gentleness", like "tenderness" which makes Tim real, solid, less "doubtful".

This then, is the kind of divestment and inside view Wilkins' novels aestheticise. It is not a revelation of the truth about someone, it is more complex and subtle than that; but it is a revealing nonetheless, a stripping back or a willing divestment of the affectations, roles and fictions that cover the vulnerability of a tender place. It is this idea of tenderness (and empathy) and how it represents an aesthetic response to the conditions of postmodernity that I will discuss in my last chapter, which deals with what I see as the return of the (little) masterful subject.

Little Masters.
Part I: Contingency, Irony and Empathy.

All of what has come so far in this thesis has been my effort at explaining the significance of just one of Wilkins' words: "tenderness". This chapter shall also be about this word; what it signifies, how it 'works' and how it relates to Wilkins' treatment of postmodernism. It is my argument that "tenderness" (essentially a form of empathy and means of structuring coherent relations with others) is, in Wilkins' fiction, the sign whereby we may observe what I consider to be the return of the masterful subject, emblematised in the figure Healey promises to become and, most especially, in the children we come to think of as the 'little masters' of the second novel.

In short, tenderness is the marker in Wilkins' fiction for a return to a perception of the postmodern in which coherent constructions of the world and the relationships of those within it are again seen as possibilities. Tenderness is the possibility brought forth from what I have observed as the dominant mode of postmodernism evident in Wilkins' fiction. As I have argued, this dominant postmodernism is characterised by exhaustion, inculcation and the perceived failure of history. On the level of subjectivity what this amounts to is a loss of context which, in turn, is manifested as the associated disorders of narcissism and aphasia. And yet, from this construction of postmodernism, and in particular, its pervasive sense of contingency, Wilkins shows us that tenderness is also a possibility. This word *contingency* is all-important here as the possibility or otherwise of tender and empathetic perception rests on the way in which contingency is dealt with. Moreover, it is on this question of contingency that we can, in Wilkins' fiction, distinguish roughly between two types of character. The first are those I refer to as ironists or 'little master' figures. The second are the exhausted figures represented primarily as fathers (and grandfathers), but more generally, as the adults of both novels. The difference between these two types is explained by Richard Rorty in relation to the postmodern condition of contingency. Thus while the adults of these novels fear themselves "doomed to spend ...[their]... conscious lives trying to escape from contingency", the masterful figures, "like the strong poet, acknowledge and appropriate contingency".[1]

---

[1]See Rorty, Richard. "The Contingency of Selfhood" in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989. p.28.

For the adults in Wilkins' texts the sense of the contingent world comes hand in hand with a reminder about the end of the grand narratives that most of these characters have set their lives to. In the absence of these grand narratives only contingency remains, felt as a "blankness", a nothingness or void. As such, Healey's condition of aphasia reveals a fear of contingency that is characteristic of the adult generations in Wilkins' fiction. Hence, Healey's quest for his 'height of observing', like the similar 'ascensions' the men before him have tried to live by, is little more than an attempt to overcome the 'fearful' contingency of the world by looking for a position of omniscience. It is the perception of contingency, then, that differentiates subjectivity in Wilkins' fiction, and this difference can be summarised as a division between viewing the world as contingent and chaotic or, like the 'little masters', seeing the world as contingent and immanent.

What is significant about the tenderness Wilkins evokes, and what makes it a postmodern possibility, is that it is brought forth from this contingency. Tenderness is thus for Wilkins what we can refer to as a postmodern concept, and this is why it is possible to use another postmodern concept such as metafiction to foreground its conditions and effects. In simple terms, it is in the subject's relationship to contingency (in so far as it is revealed through their relationship with language) that the notion of 'mastery' is revealed. Moreover, in so far as this 'mastery' is itself built on a postmodern/metafictional consciousness, tenderness is perceived.

But before we proceed with illustration of the masterful figure, one of the first things that should be said is that it is not 'mastery' in the traditional sense of the term that is meant here in reference to the figures in Wilkins' fiction. The 'mastery' I am concerned with is sufficiently postmodern as not to include any meta-positions or objective forms of knowledge or skill that seem implicit to this term. My understanding of mastery does not describe any notion of dominance but rather, a virtuosity revealed through a working with contingency and difference towards the coherent and meaningful interaction of subjectivities, contexts and histories.[2] In accordance with this sense of contingency it is

---

[2]In many respects my notion of mastery is, perhaps, nothing more sophisticated than a collective term for those qualities (wisdom, transience, humour, creativity and empathy) Kohut suggests that the narcissist (if unimpeded) simply grows into. Of course, empathy is my focus here, but in the contingency and irony, as well as the self-consciousness and affectation I also discuss, we have Kohut's terms represented. In a certain sense, and by Kohut's argument, 'mastery', as I discuss it, is not so out of the ordinary as simply a natural enough possibility perhaps always available to the subject.

on a note of attenuation that mastery (as evinced by Wilkins) is built, and this is evident in the title of his second novel. It is no coincidence then that it is about 'little masters' that we talk, since although these figures are predominantly (little) children, it is through their mastery of attenuated instances and 'small readings' that their 'mastery' of contingency, subjectivity and importantly, empathy and tenderness is made apparent.

This idea of contingency takes us back to the hope Teresa confesses that the "little facts" might, "in the end stand by themselves [...] in splendid isolation" (8). In Wilkins' fiction these "little facts" are the moments of tenderness ("gentleness" and empathy) by which context and relation - the way we make coherent the contingent, postmodern world - are forwarded. The "little facts" are also (remembering Teresa's pregnancy) the little children that populate these novels; they are the 'little masters' as I have referred to them. The "splendid isolation" that Teresa describes is thus the quality of contingency made splendid for the hope it holds for a return to coherency and empathy without also returning to the sort of grand narratives that Teresa, like the majority of Wilkins' adult characters, have all to some degree been damaged by.

In contrast to these exhausted figures the 'little masters' are characterised by "self esteem" and "self image" (L.M.,381); they are "wonder[s]," (401) "improviser[s]" and "angel[s]" (396) as Jilly, at one point says; "beautiful, talented" (409) children whose subjectivities are built on a playing of "changing, infinitely various inner narratives" (333). These characters are quite properly the 'little masters' of both novels and they are defined by their absorption of the postmodern world: its contingent basis as well as their "genius" for a kind of attenuated 'mastery' of some possibilities of subjectivity and relation. It is such masterful figures that Lawrence Jones describes in his essay on the New Zealand novel in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature* when he talks about the new generation of writers who seem "almost to have begun with a fully developed repertoire of modes and techniques".[3] As Jones observes, it is as though these writers have simply begun, already "formidably accomplished technically, with a wide range of modes and techniques, able and willing to choose and mix them freely" (179). In many respects this is also a description of Rorty's "ironist". Here again the relevance of the metafictional metaphor appears, as the ironist or 'little master' is essentially an author figure (a postmodern author). Not surprisingly then, such figures are distinguished from

---

[3]See Lawrence Jones in *The Oxford History of New Zealand literature.* Terry Sturm (ed.), Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998. p.179.

others by their relationship to language and the aesthetic. What is implicit here is the connection metafiction observes in the postmodern world of language and representation with selfhood. Indeed the masterful subject or ironist has a forebear in the figure of the strong poet: that individual whose experience of self is aligned with the success of their capacity for new description.

What I mean by this term 'mastery' is outlined by Rorty when he writes about the "ironist". The 'little master' or ironist figure is the one who has come up with a means of accommodating and even assimilating much of the postmodern condition, especially its concern with contingency and provisionality. The masterful figure is thus that figure who, having been born into the postmodern world, exhibits a natural and easy absorption and understanding of its effects, and is able to re-commence the project of human interaction with tenderness and empathy, having first displayed a mastery of selfhood. This figure simply begins with the postmodern sensibility and, as such, goes about the business of complex life while maintaining a possibility for empathetic connection.

However, if we return to Jones' phrase on the ability of the writer to "choose and mix freely" we can see this as another description of what Rorty refers to as the metastability of the ironist, something which in Wilkins' fiction is revealed as a kind of liminality in relation to fixed boundaries: truths or objective readings. The figures of this liminality are the children of *Little Masters* who are able to "waft between categories, seeming less than solid" (30) like "little ghost[s]" (139). Indeed the ironist like an author is defined primarily by their use of language. Thus, like those authors Lawrence Jones is talking about, the ironist too is conscious of the conditions of postmodernity where

> [a]nything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, [...] and [where] their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies, puts them in a position which Sartre called "metastable": never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, [ironists are thus] always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves.[4]

For Rorty, one's "final vocabulary" is the set of words to which we have attached aspects of our selfhood. This is a vocabulary deemed final by some in so far as it is built on terms like "Christ" or "decency" on which we have set our judgements and values; the words on which, as Wilkins says in "Opening the Bag", "we have set our certainties" (70).

---

[4]"The Contingency of Selfhood". p.73.

The ironist is the one who is impressed by other vocabularies and realises that theirs is not either closer to the truth or drawn from some meta-vocabulary, and that their doubts cannot be assuaged within the terms of their own vocabulary. The ironist is then remarkable for their "ability to grasp the function of many different sets of words" (Rorty 94), which is also the basis for a kind of empathy; a recognition of otherness and difference. Moreover, the ironist is aware that in fact there is no "final vocabulary" or meta-language in which the "truth" is revealed.

It is Daniel's metastability, his acceptance and appropriation of the contingency of the world, that is noted by Adrian when he considers the "changing, infinitely various inner narratives" (333) of his son. Moreover, it makes little difference that, as Sister Veronica points out, he "doesn't know Jesus [...] hasn't a clue who that is hanging on the wall, bleeding, in his crown of thorns" (219). The world is no less 'real' or sensible to Daniel for this reason; as Rorty would say, Daniel does not recognise the 'final vocabulary' that is built on the term/concept, "Jesus". And yet Daniel is one of the few in the texts who is able to make sense and meaning where others feel only the meaningless or senseless. This is a situation represented by the relation of the 'little masters' to what is ostensibly the central symbol of indeterminate meaning in the novels: sheep. In both novels the sheep are cyphers of a sort; they are material 'substitutes' for "blankness".[5] The sheep for the children become a sort of blank surface onto which they stage performance. As Daniel's shepherding of the sheep illustrates, the sheep are a kind of blankness these masterful figures can manipulate and control and seem naturally enough to know a lot about.

What we can say about the sheep is that they embody the passivity of an exhausted generation who are like sheep themselves in relation to the processes of familial inculcation and history. Tim, for example, remembers as a child being made with his siblings into "silly lambs" (215) by his parents who place large judicial wigs, like "fleece[s]" over the children's heads. The children bumble about aimlessly but it is the sense of their being manipulated (note, they are penned in the kitchen until after 'dessert'

---

[5]This connection between sheep and "blankness" has a context in Teresa's trip to the camp site her parents stayed at after arriving as immigrants to New Zealand. As Teresa explains, the "blankness" she expected to find there has been substituted for sheep. Blankness is perhaps the effect of Teresa's discovery of this situation as the scene of the farm and the sheep remains unreadable to her. In another sense of course, the sheep are, as cyphers, representative of her generation. In effect, a generation of "conduits" as Teresa considers; a generation who has lost its autonomy and remains passive without the context for history or subjectivity. As Teresa says, "we feel pleasant [...] like sheep" (12).

when they are released) and their passivity beneath the weight of a tradition (here associated with patriarchy and law) that really gets to the condition of their 'sheepishness'. Thus the adults of the present in Wilkins' fiction conform, to some extent, to a 'sheepish' context. This is something reinforced when Emily remarks on how the sheep in the kitchen are in shock. Of course it is the generation of characters like Emily and Teresa as well as Jilly and Tim who are in shock (indeed it has been my assertion that the experience of something like shock and loss are what these generations have been inculcated into by their parents in one way or another). Jilly unwittingly voices this when she conflates her position with that of the sheep by responding, "*They'r*e in shock?" (391). Moreover, the adults are treated as sheep by the shepherding Daniel as he gets them to mimic the movement of the sheep. "Walk slowly [...] move all at once, together. Enter like a group and stay close"(390).

It is as a kind of "genius" or "expert" (391) that Daniel controls the sheep. Earlier in the novel it is Daniel's performance with the sheep, in concert with Michaela and Gwen, that sets these children apart as 'masterful'. In the scene in the barn the sheep become the material from which invention and play are generated. In contrast to the kind of hypnotism these same sheep induce in Tim and Adrian, inside the barn it is like a small secret theatre or circus that is discovered by Adrian:

> Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls [...] [w]hat you see here today is no illusion. The milk boy is real! He must drink anything that has milk in it. Drink, drink, my little one. Drink from nature's own milk bottle. Behold! [...] see how he sucks. Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, this is totally real! [...] [W]e have not been lying. He is the milk boy. He drinks milk! (353)

Michaela is here the master of ceremonies and her claim to reality ("no illusion") remembers the vacuum salesman's pitch and the "realism" of his demonstration. Daniel's milk 'sucking' remembers also the vacuum cleaner itself as well as the 'sucking' of that dangerous cup of coffee Daniel appears ready to perform. The point of this rhyming of scenes is to make a distinction between forms of "reality" and also between the masterful subject and the exhausted one. Of course the performance in the barn is "illusion": it is a performance and an artifice produced through making unfamiliar the familiar: (the sheep are the prime figure of this familiarity) after all, that Daniel "drinks milk!" is hardly startling, but that he drinks it directly from a sheep is unusual.

What we have here is a re-invention and re-interpretation of reality; of usages, contexts and the commonplace. Daniel's performance with the sheep is, undoubtably, something he has learned from his time on his friend's farm. Here then lies the context that Daniel is playing on and that the others find excitingly unfamiliar and 'other'. But it is the translation of this action into a theatrical production that signifies the ironist or 'little master's' intuition and capacity for reinvention of the familiar.

In contrast, the vacuum cleaner salesman's claim to realism depends solely on the familiarity (the final vocabulary) of the sales demonstration. The repetition of this demonstration and the exhaustion of the 'reality' it purports to represent are something that are embodied by the continually recycled, and by now possibly toxic, coffee. We note Daniel's inherently ironic impulse in threatening to drink the coffee. This action would be ironic in the Rortean sense since it would shatter the familiarity and form of the demonstration. Where the ironist seeks to find new meanings for old familiar terms, the exhausted figure depends on repetition and the inculcation of the familiar. Aside from this, the scene above is a kind of metaphor for the capacity the ironist and 'little master' manifests in meaning production. Just as Daniel may take succour from the sheep, so too then the masterful figure makes meaning from blankness; in fact, uses blankness as a writer does an empty page when they explore some possible readings, roles, performances or fictions.

Masterful figures are defined by their appropriation of the contingent, and indeed these figures are born into conditions of contingency. This is true of Daniel who at an early age loses his mother and moves from one family to another before settling down with a 'stranger' for a father. Michaela too is largely a product of contingent forces: the breakup of her parents, her mother's re-marriage as well as the various border crossings and exchanges between caregivers she is subjected to. Perhaps it is this very sense of contingency that Emily reacts to when she reflects on Michaela and how she is "in awe of the forces that had shaped her" if not also a little "horrified" (78) by her.

The evidence of Michaela's mastery is nowhere so greatly stated as in her performance and 'defeat' of the magician, Herr Funster. Funster's illusions (his magic) are nothing more than staged demonstrations of contingency, and it is this display of impermanence and apparent metastability that the children (other 'little masters') in the audience enjoy. Thus, Funster proceeds with "dizzying speed", jumping from one trick to another, making objects disappear and return again:

> He pulled a rabbit out of a hat. He did fancy juggling with silver balls. The dove came back and he swallowed it. He ate the cane. He swallowed fire. He ate his hat and the silver balls. [...] then everything started coming back. (97)

Funster's show, or illusion, of mastery is chiefly demonstrated through his manipulation of presence and absence. In a Freudian sense, Funster's act amounts to little more than a sort of 'fort-da' game. The props are, of course, a little better, but it is still a control of presence, a "staging of an appearance as a disappearance"[6] that situates the pleasure the children identify in his performance. The children recognise what they see as a kind of mastery here, and this is not so different from what I have previously described as Wilkins' metafictional effect: the means by which the sense of the presence of 'reality' is created through the act of casting away or dismissing objective appeals to, and presentation of, 'reality'. In other words, the effect of the real (and by extension, tenderness) is registered by characters in Wilkins' fiction at those points in relation where (through performance, affectation and artifice) reality is acknowledged as just another representation.

The acknowledgment of reality as just another representation situates in Wilkins' texts the relevance of metafiction as a concept that at once describes the contingency and postmodernity of Wilkins' fiction, as well as an aesthetic of engagement and empathy based, in the texts, on moments of self-conscious artifice (fictional moments) where something of the self, and the other, is revealed. This *something* is of course nothing less than another fiction (an instance of representation and reading), but it is conducted by tenderness and empathy and is the product of what I think Wilkins means by his phrase "getting caught in the act". In relation to the question of subjectivity, and the possibility for meaningful engagement with others in the postmodern world, we can say that masterful figures (like good magicians and metafictional authors) are able to stage appearances of 'self' through what are also the disappearances or fictions of 'self'. Of course 'staging' is the operative term here, since self can only ever be perceived through representation. Self is always only an "almost true lie", a "half-image" as Healey says, though we give it "the semblance of life" (236).

---

[6]See, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in *The Freud Reader*. (Ed.) Peter Gay, Vintage, 1995. p.600.

In so far as the magician is like the writer who is also a creator of illusions and fictions, then it is essentially representation that is the subject of Funster's show. He starts the show by removing rapidly the layer of mayoral clothing, a "skin" as Emily thinks, which only reveals a false suit, a representation underneath: a suit drawn onto a one-piece body stocking. Herr Funster is himself a layering of representations. As we have already noted in Wilkins' fiction, clothing is a metaphor for language, and in his rapid divestment, Funster is performing the contingency of language: its sloughing of meanings, of signifiers that only refer to more signifiers; representations that refer only to other representations. Again, this is the process of metastability we associate with the ironist and 'little master'.

On the issue of 'mastery' Funster is shown to be an imposter in what Emily sees as Michaela's "world" (98). In part Michaela's ironism and mastery are evident in her seemingly natural appropriation and "fit" within the contingency of the magician's performance. She is a 'little master' of this performance, and this is what she proves by "improving" Funster's trick by breaking her wand. She controls the show, slowing its pace to suit herself and causing in Funster a kind of desperation not present before. In light of Michaela's natural affinity for illusion, Funster is "lost" (101) and he begins to panic. In short, Funster has become "redundant" (101) to what has become Michaela's show. Michaela is "at home" in the performance and in conducting some contingencies of reality.

However, it is Rorty's evocation of the activity of "literary criticism" as the mode of the ironist's capacity for relation that outlines the method for a sort of intersubjective coherency both he and Wilkins are interested in. Again we cannot help but notice the relevance of the metafictional assumption of the world as text, and of selves as writers/readers. In Rorty's reading, the masterful subject or ironist is essentially an author figure: an individual who structures subjectivity and relationships with others through a process of constant and dynamic evaluation and re-evaluation of contexts. This is a process, as Rorty points out, recognisable as the "business" of literary criticism. Rorty suggests that philosophical inquiry should fall in line with a model of literary criticism rather than searching for metaphysical truths. What Rorty offers can be seen as an extension of the irony and contingency, but also historicity, of the self-conscious figures and methods both writers offer. For Rorty, literary critics operate as ironists and thus

> are not in the business of explaining the real meaning of books, nor of evaluating something called their "literary merit". Rather, they spend their time placing books in the context of other books, figures in the context of other figures. This placing is done in the same way as we place a new friend or enemy in the context of old friends or enemies. In the course of doing so, we revise our own moral identity by revising our own final vocabulary. Literary criticism does for the ironist what the search for universal moral principles is supposed to do for metaphysicians (80).

What Rorty is offering here is a mode of postmodern relation through which the world of 'others' can be structured on points of connection; instances of what Wilkins (as I read him) decides to call "tenderness". The process of relation that Rorty describes is thus also the process at work in Wilkins' texts and especially in the characters we see as the 'little masters'. Through this playing of contexts that Rorty outlines, something like Wilkins' tenderness and empathy comes to represent a form of coherent relation to others for the reason that it endorses difference and contingency while side-stepping notions of objective reality and the sort of appeals to 'truth' that are the basis for a concept (as Rorty sees it) of an idea like "literary merit".

For Healey as with the ironist, forms of coherency, or as is the case, tenderness, come with a 'rubbing' of the "new" with the "old". This sort of friction is staged near the end of *The Miserables* when we are presented with a scene in which Healey together with an older man press between them in an act of revivification a young hypothermic child (the old and young figures here, representing old and new versions of Healey). In this "sandwiching of the tiers" (228) - what Rorty refers to as the playing of the new off against the old - context is generated:[7] Healey grasps something of his own situation, indeed the condition of his subjectivity, while placed in that generational 'hug'. With the reviving of the child something of Healey's selfhood is also revived, and this becomes a trigger for the revelation of tenderness with which the novel finishes.

As we have observed through the condition of Healey's aphasia, context is crucial for the generation of intersubjective contiguity as well as the perception of the self. Moreover, context allows for the perception of tenderness and empathy as it allows for

---

[7]This form of context generation is what the 'little master' figures also produce through a playing off of the familiar and the unfamiliar. Indeed, as Patricia Waugh points out, this process is a part of the metafictional production of the world. As Waugh says, "metafiction [...] offers both innovation *and* familiarity through the individual reworking and undermining of familiar conventions" (*M.,T.T.P.S.F.* 12). In this way metafiction is revealed as related to empathy in so far as it allows for both recognition and stability (the familiar), as well as difference (the innovative or unfamiliar). Waugh's quote is also a description of the ironist's production of meaning and coherency within a contingent world view.

the acknowledgment of difference in others. Context is precisely what aphasics and narcissists - the figures of exhaustion in Wilkins' novels - are missing. In Wilkins' fiction, "context deficiency" is at the root of the debilitating and dominant form of the postmodern.[8] The recovery of context is what enables Healey to perceive tenderness. The process of this recovery is built on Healey's re-examination of the old and the new: his memories placed against his experience of the present; and in so far as this process also structures the novel, then *The Miserables* is to a large extent parabolic of the Rortean depiction of literary criticism.

This process of "placing" the old with the new in the generation of context is also, then, the process whereby history (historical context) may, for the postmodern subjectivity, be re-engaged with. The 'history' meant here is not, however, history as grand narrative, as truth or fact or, for that matter, a concept of history (that Wilkins also represents) instanced by the processes of inculcation and the repression of autonomy and difference. What is meant here by the term history is little more than a collection of various (and variously important) texts. History as such, far from being static, is something that the subject engages with other texts, contexts, and the present. In the process, the subject is re-contextualising both 'history' and the self. In Wilkins' novels the sense of history as a meaningful context is largely absent. For most of the figures in these novels history has effectively ended with the death of the grandfather of the first novel. The wider context for this end of history is, as I have suggested earlier, the events of the Second World War, in particular, the concentration camps. Indeed, as I have earlier suggested, Auschwitz looms like a spectre over the exhaustion and sense of disruption these novels "ghost" and attend to.

It is the death of the grandfather that symbolically prefaces the exhaustion of the general populace of both novels and is associated, as I have said, with the demise of grand narrative authority and the exhaustion of history itself. However, both texts also articulate acts of re-engagement with history (especially through the context of family), though this is only made possible when characters, (ironists and 'little masters') commit

---

[8]In regard to Lodge's linguistic typology of postmodernism I take mastery, in effect, to describe a kind of balancing act between the metaphoric and metonymic poles of language. Hence, mastery is indicative of an ability to use both metonymy and metaphor. For this reason the masterful figure stands in "metastable" or liminal relation to the poles of language and, like Healey, is able to structure subjectivity outside the metaphor-dominant mode of postmodernism (characterised by narcissism and inculcation), preferring instead a postmodern condition felt to be a condition of immanence - contingent, yes, but allowing a freedom to "mix and choose" freely.

to acts essentially of imagination, in which history is "written into", re-contextualised by the subject. Hence Healey's project is to re-write, or write for himself, his own personal and familial history, in the process recovering his context and relationship to the family. *Little Masters* continues this motif of re-engagement with history notably through the character Nessie, another of the 'little masters' who, like Healey, re-establishes a contiguity with her own familial history by writing (symbolically) her place into it.

To preface this moment, however, we can say that the promise of historical contiguity in this novel (represented here by the family history of Tim and Jilly) is resumed with the reappearance of the actual "little masters": the seventeenth century etchings. These etchings are significant not least of all for the reason that they are something that has been hidden, kept from the next generation. In a sense, these etchings represent the kind of stalled history we see in *The Miserables* as a consequence of the interruptions and the epistemic break signified chiefly by the events of the Second World War. In *Little Masters* the context for a similar sense of interruption is, in the case of the etchings, familial. The etchings have been hidden from Tim's father during the period of his breakdown after the death of his daughter. Prior to this the father had been silently destroying the family's precious items and it is only because the "little masters" are rescued from his attention that they survive. More sinisterly, (as I have previously argued), this period of destruction is prefaced by the suggestion of an abusive and incestuous relationship between the father and the daughter. The "little masters" for this reason are representative of artefacts from before the 'fall' in this family's history. As such, their reappearance represents a possibility for a bridging of the gap in this family's history. Similarly, these etchings are also invested with the context of this 'fall', and so with the recovery of these pieces there is recovered also the possibility for re-establishing a contiguity between the present, the period of destruction, and the period before this 'break'.[9]

---

[9]Notably the use by Wilkins in his fiction of artefacts from the seventeenth century suggests a connection to the period of enlightenment (Hobbes' *Leviathan* was published in 1651) and Rousseau's romanticism. In this connection we can see Wilkins performing his own kind of re-contextualising through his depiction of a postmodernism that references these two previous modes. Of course, this is an ironic referencing just as Wilkins' use of the term "mastery" suggests. In staging through his fiction a reconnection with the seventeenth century Wilkins is himself, to some extent, "getting caught" in the construction of his postmodernism. In the process Wilkins is casting doubt on those 'definitions' of postmodernity which describe it as an effect of the end of history. Wilkins' postmodernism is historic, though it is not a reinstatement of either the romantic or the enlightenment projects. What Wilkins seems concerned to show us is the historicity of his postmodernity; how it is contiguous with the past but is also able to re-use and use differently some of the vocabulary of romanticism. Wilkins' postmodernism, like his little master figure, is

On the grander scale of Wilkins' depiction of the postmodern, we can say that these etchings stand in not only for the instance of a family's 'interruption' (the family's cohesion and experience of contiguity "interfere[d]"[10] with) but also for that interruption or epistemic break from which postmodernism was itself born. But just as these etchings represent a possibility for historical contiguity, they also represent the effects of the dominant generation who have learned to fear history, and variously have tried to ignore, repress or repudiate it. In Wilkins' fiction the sort of histories that produce this reaction in characters are those of the same sort of secret, familial transgressions that, like the etchings, are kept hidden and 'closeted' by the family.[11] As I have said, the adults and exhausted figures of Wilkins' fiction primarily are wary and weary of history. Catherine in *Little Masters* notes how "in the end history humiliated everyone" (147), while Teresa, as we have already noted, struggles to achieve autonomy from a life she describes as a "history lesson" built on generational "impedimenta". Healey holds a similar regard to history when he declares his own refusal to "be held hostage by memorabilia" (47). These views are all indicative of the attitudes towards history that distinguish the exhausted figures from the masterful ones.

It is for these reasons that the uncovering of the etchings; the uncovering of all the old tensions and histories and contexts cathected within their frames, is remarkable. In the context of her parent's generation of hostility and resentment, of a constant solicitude to the past, Vanessa, with ease and delight, sits down to 'write' her place into 'history' as she draws (perhaps, more accurately, scribbles) her designs inside the etchings' frames. Symbolically then this is representative of a rapprochement with history. This is an image crucial to the success of Wilkins' material in describing the mastery available to the subject and to the notion of being in the world. What we note here also is a kind of symmetry at work in having a daughter writing into a family history that previously another daughter, because of a father, has effectively been written out of.

---

essentially metastable: it is built on a playing off of the old and familiar with the new and unfamiliar.

[10]If we remember, it is the word "interference" that Tim is plagued by in his memories of his father and sister. The suggestion the word contains for him is of the "nastily sexual" (235).

[11]Of course, the "little masters" are quite literally closeted in this novel. Tim wraps them in a blanket and stores them in a set of drawers in the garage. The "little masters" thus represent a part of a family history that is not to be looked upon and it seems symbolic that their custodian for so many years (Mrs.Whittemore) is herself, almost totally blind.

Masterful figures thus find ways of connecting the old with the new, and as such they are able to generate context. When Vanessa makes her "new" marks on the "old" etchings she is symbolically establishing her context and her place within the history of the family. This is something Teresa is unable to do; hence she remains nothing more than a "conduit" (19). Nessie's act is essentially metafictional in so much as she is super-imposing one reality onto another: drawing into a drawing and 'writing' into a 'writing'. Importantly it is this feeling for context, (an assured sense of selfhood) that prefaces the moment of delectation the novel ends with. Again, as with the ending of *The Miserables*, this is a moment of tenderness. This moment, perhaps more than any other, signifies the little master's ability (and whimsy) for connection. It is for no reason but for "the passing pleasure of it" (414) that Nessie bites into Adrian's shoulder. She does so because she may, and there is no greater 'logic' for this moment.

Similarly in a scene involving Adrian and Daniel it is context (or more especially, context production) that provides the structure of the hand-holding "game" that once again brings forth a moment of empathy and tenderness. Again this is a tenderness predicated on an ironic practice, and, as with the example above of Nessie's 'drawing', it is 'history' that is implicitly at the centre of this transaction. The point is that history is necessary for the perception of tenderness, and the following passage, like no other in Wilkins' texts, appears to make this clear:

> In the early days Adrian's hopefulness and his caution produced in Daniel only a sort of deadened acquiescence. At a certain point -- perhaps when they were crossing a main road -- the father would reach out his hand and, in response, the son would hang his hand up in the air but still at a distance. Daniel never completed the movement himself; it was always left to Adrian to achieve contact, to reach down and take it. Over time, however, the little drama which at first depressed and irritated Adrian lost its purpose and became simply a game, good natured and touched with irony. The repetition contained the less successful past but also offered a playful commentary on its difficulties. Now Daniel was as likely to hang up his hand *before* Adrian had reached for it; the sequence was broken, the two of them could smile, at least for now, at those earlier, forced versions of themselves (208).

Again it is the playing off of the old and new which is involved here and revealed as a kind of commentary, not only on the history (and context) of this specific action (the hand holding) but also on the state of the growing relationship between Adrian and Daniel. We observe a self-consciousness present in the "little drama" which is an implicit conjecture as to context, a referencing of their recent and shared history of old and new gestures (of the possibilities explored in the recent past and the possibilities of the immediate present). It is here also where the two of them can be seen to allow themselves

to be caught, playing the "game", thinking about the other, "caught in the act" of playing with and within an instantiation or representation of the aesthetic of their relationship structured as a hand-holding game.

As we observed in the previous chapter, the sense of empathy and tenderness discovered here comes as a consequence of a foregrounding of the aesthetic and an awareness of an other: a feeling for difference heightened here by the consideration of difference itself: a new way of holding out the hand. Here it is the "commentary on the past", the history of this "little drama" and its aesthetic, that is the basis (context) for the play. Similarly, it is at this moment that otherness is perceived in so far as the moment relies on a conversation or dialogue of participation.

Moreover, this passage is metonymic for the processes involved in Wilkins' postmodern notions of relation, empathy and tenderness. The above passage foregrounds the self reflexivity and metafictional nature of interaction and illustrates the condition of subjectivity as one of "versions of selves". Moreover, we see how empathy and "getting caught in the act" resemble an aesthetic in their own sense as a game or structure and ironic playing of older and newer histories in the process of context generation. In short, what we register from the above passage is a metonym (which is also the only way you can structure any sensible talk about postmodernity) for Wilkins' postmodern politics of empathy. In the writing of Umberto Eco we find a companion passage to the above which both reflects the significance of the Wilkins passage while openly outlining a mode of postmodern coherent relation. Usefully enough, it also takes us back to the question I began with:[12] the question of talking about love in the postmodern world. Eco writes:

> I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, 'I love you madly,' because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, 'As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly'. At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age lost of innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated, both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony. ... both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love.[13]

---

[12]See introduction to the thesis, p.1.
[13]See Eco, Umberto. *Reflections on The Name of The Rose.* London: Secker and Warburg, 1984.p.67.

Eco's lovers are similarly Wilkins' "little masters" and Rorty's ironist: they all seek new uses for old phrases. They make the phrase "I love you madly" ironic through a replaying of contexts; by placing the phrase against old usages, the history of other texts ("the challenge of the past and the already said") in coming up with a use that is playful, affected and effective in translating this "love" at the same time as acknowledging the condition and quality of their relationship: the "knowing" that "she knows he knows". Because of this "knowingness" the result of this play is that the speaker is caught in the act; caught in the essentially ironic and metafictional processes of this conveyance of love. As such the woman receives the "declaration of love" as much for what is said, as for what is not said. What we read (and what 'she' registers) is the appearance of the idea of "love" between the two of them staged as a disappearance (here an affectation) of that idea when it appears to be undermined by irony. This use of irony is, as Eco says, a "pleasure", a "game", and it is a mode of the postmodern condition where, as Teresa says, "from birth" we are "trained [...] to hear not what *is* being said but what is *not* being said, what is *really* being said" (10). Love, tenderness and empathy are strong possibilities of irony, and in Wilkins' fiction are revealed through the play of contexts and the tender uses of language that acknowledge the contingency of the world seen here as an awareness of both what is and what isn't said.

Part II: Tenderness.

As I have suggested, I have been primarily concerned in this thesis to distinguish the significance of the term "tenderness", since I see this term as central to the depiction of the condition of postmodernity that Wilkins (as I see it) commits to. Having discussed the notion of "little mastery" and described the processes involved in the communication of tenderness and empathy, I want now to move towards an understanding of tenderness on its own terms. Tenderness works as an abstraction; it represents the signification of a quality that if it is to have any valency as a postmodern concept must remain complex, ambiguous, unspoken. As Klinkowitz rightly points out, tenderness, like "love", is not something that we can specifically talk "about", but this does not stop us from feeling its effects. Tenderness is not a truth. It is perhaps more helpful to think of tenderness as

Milan Kundera discusses it, "the creation of a tiny artificial space in which it is agreed that we would treat others as children".[14]

Thus, tenderness is for Kundera a quality of relation. Moreover, it is a "tiny artificial space" and this is similarly the point of attenuation (and metonymy) befitting a postmodern understanding of tenderness as a contingency, but one that is involved in structuring coherency in relation. Kundera's reference to the "artificial space", however, is a sure enough reference to the metafictional/postmodern condition - a space created by the aesthetic use of language and also affectation, performance, fictions - where such a space is the place we structure and where we are caught in the act. The "artificial space" Kundera talks about could be seen as Daniel's affected giggle, or it could be the artificial space Healey creates in writing about his memories; likewise Wilkins' two novels are, in the wider scheme of things, tiny spaces of artifice where an author and 'his' tenderness are caught. This "tiny artificial space" is, then, exactly what Wilkins with his metafictional approach sets out to capture between people. Metafiction after all, as a theory of representation, is also one of the artificial: the small moments I have been describing as the fictions, affectations, roles and performances we create in our everyday relations with others and the world.

In so far as tenderness is revealed on this condition of role play, games and affectation, then we are as children (in particular, like the children of Wilkins' novels) when we become aware of our relation to affectation and performance; when we observe the inherent fictionality of all our representations. Tenderness is not a truth but a place where we allow ourselves to be caught and sometimes catch others in empathetic connection and where we can feel for, while also feeling different from, others. The artificial space is that space cleared by our metafictional appropriations; our postmodern awareness, and it is the space in which 'we know they know that we know'.

However, in relation to Kundera's quote we note in Wilkins' novels a tendency to have characters appear childish in moments of emotion and tenderness. The point is not so much that these characters are 'being' childish, but that they choose to behave in a childish manner; they adopt and affect a 'childishness' as it is something they seem to need to do in order to experience tenderness with an other. Thus Adrian, as we have

---

[14]See Kundera, Milan. *The Art of The Novel.* New York: Grove Press, 1988. p.30.

noted, plays at being a child with Daniel: hiding together from the passing others, and later, even mimicking a child's language. Moreover, when talking to his mother over the phone he becomes his mother's "Babusz" (411) again, crying to her, opening himself up. Similarly in *The Miserables*, when Healey phones his wife, Louise, we observe that he becomes something of a child in their conversation. Indeed, it seems as though Healey phones Louise so as to feel the "deeply comforting [...] childish satisfaction" (137) that he needs. Healey feels loved perhaps because of the "indulgence" Louise permits him and the fact that she would "suffer this inconvenience for him" (the phone call is a late one). This is, it seems, Healey's limited way of recognising tenderness.[15]

Notably the children in *Little Masters* only seem estranged from one another and out of touch with their ironic playful selves when they are made, by Jilly, to behave as adults at their dinner table. This is Jilly's plan, and is a part of the control she wishes to exert over the evening (and the guests), but what Jilly sees as the "freedom" of their "lovely semi-formal" dinning arrangement has the effect of "stiffen[ing]" (382) the children: "The table had barely a word. The strangeness had made them all strangers". The precedent for this exercise is of course the process of inculcation that both novels largely explore. Here, in miniature, we see the same processes at work that have shaped the generation of Healey and Jilly; an usurpation of subjectivity by an older 'narrative': children being made to behave as adults.

But in Kundera's quote the reference to children is little more than the simile that expresses the quality of that "tiny artificial space" of relation, and in so far as children seem naturally to have a mastery of the creation of artifice and fictions, then we can see how this tiny artificial space is that space of affectation acknowledged as artificial when we catch others out. It is in the kiss shared between Adrian and Emily that we find the confluence of these ideas as well as a lesson about the contingency of tenderness itself.

---

[15]Indeed, it is perhaps worth mentioning that Louise is important to Healey not least for her indulgence of him, but for the fact that she is ostensibly a kind of 'little master' figure herself. For Healey (as he predominantly appears in the text) Louise is the key to his experience of tenderness and emotion and arguably it is her inherent ironism (her use of language) that he is attracted to. Thus we find Healey in a state of "exhilaration" listening to Louise: "here was utterance, he felt, not already measured to a certain vocabulary, a certain grammar and a certain column width" (22). Like an ironist, Louise appears to have a capacity to use and appropriate various vocabularies; to "grasp the function of many different sets of words" (Rorty 94).

In many respects the moment of the kiss is quite profoundly anti-romantic. That is to say, such is the self-consciousness of the moment that there seems to be little connection between the two characters. There is, however, some tenderness here, though we have to wait until later in the novel to recognise this. And even here, in the moment that perhaps the entire novel has been shaping as a kind of epiphany, contingency is still the lesson. So it is then that the expected 'coming together' of Adrian and Emily (the merging of their narratives) and the connection and tenderness we expect are somewhat undermined. Specifically it is tenderness which is shown to be a contingency of a moment that is, in every way, provisional itself.

> They ducked down beneath the window and kissed. Had she meant to? The skin of his cheeks was soft for a male, she thought. The little rectangle of muscle at the tip of his broad nose delighted her. With Xavier -- Xavier! -- she thought only of lips, and of the teeth behind the lips -- the lip's bony skeleton. This boy was different; he seemed full faced. He didn't poke, he busily pressed all his features and, after the initial smothering effect, gradually the features gave, pillowed, spread satisfyingly across her. She supposed she had not given such ardent analysis to a kiss since -- when? -- early adolescence perhaps. And it occurred to her that if Ricky Bernays had vanished, he'd gone not into the past but the future; Adrian now somehow preceded him. Emily felt very young.
>
> Adrian thought Emily's mouth was smaller than he had previously imagined or that he'd somehow missed it with his lunge. He was nervous. They were kissing as friends, weren't they? -- old friends almost -- because they had seemed at ease together. The intensity, then, was a surprise. At first he didn't feel properly attached, so he buried himself, hoping the force would find something. It was too much, he knew, but everything was too much here, and she, this genius of foreign phrases, seemed willing for now to accept his clumsiness. He understood also that he was trying, without success, to imagine Anna's mouth. Instead an image of Daniel's lips appeared to him -- did he have his mother's mouth? When Stefan had said the boy was a copy he was wrong. His son was neither a copy of Adrian nor of Anna; Daniel at least around the mouth, was a copy of Emily. When finally Adrian relaxed, it was as if they could go to sleep like this, joined (375).

At once this kiss contains tenderness and empathy as well as distance and estrangement. The impression is of two adolescents kissing for the first time. Thus Emily feels "very young" and Adrian becomes "[t]his boy" with whom, by kissing, she has somehow travelled back in time with (back before the death of Ricky Bernays). Indeed, the childishness of the kiss is an impression given greater weight considering the rhyming Wilkins makes of this scene with the earlier scene where, hiding behind a bush, Adrian and Daniel "lean" forward into each other. Again it is the sense of a shared secret: being 'caught out' together in what is ostensibly foolish behaviour - hiding like children from an approaching scientist - that prefaces the moment of tenderness. Both Adrian and Emily are made to share in the sense of their otherness, and just as Tim and Adrian feel 'othered' by the children in the barn, Emily and Adrian are made to feel suddenly 'other together'

by this approaching scientist. This 'sharedness' is the sensation that leads Adrian to feel that they are "kissing as friends". Their reaction, to hide, is childish and it is this (as much as their proximity) that makes the kiss inevitable - they both have the sensation of being 'caught out' ("has he seen us?" 375) in their own small and mutual moment of theatre, and this is the basis of the intimacy of the moment: their mutual decision to behave as children.

For both, this kiss is little more than a prompt for self-reflection and "analysis"; moreover, the kiss contains a certain morbidity, as both remember dead lovers. However, within the pervasive contingency of the moment, tenderness is present. Indeed what we can say is that even in the most studiedly contingent moment, tenderness is one of the strong possibilities. Thus the two kiss, as "old friends almost", but in truth the presence of this tenderness is not made clear for the reader until later in the novel when, instead of embarrassing Adrian in front of everyone by telling him to cease his "eager" and unwanted advances, Emily softens and considers instead that "he deserved better than that. He was, she guessed, [...] a nice person". (392) It is the tender context that the two share as a result of that brief moment together which allows for this empathy.

Tenderness is a contingency in itself, and as such there is no guarantee of radical connection. Similarly, tenderness does not reveal the truth about someone else (we note that Emily guesses Adrian is a "nice person", and earlier still Adrian says as much about Tim after their moment of tenderness), or signify an unmitigated acceptance of an other. Rather, tenderness is a small moment present within a myriad of impressions and associations that allows us to think well of an other.

So if tenderness is shown by Wilkins to be contingent, then this is a form of contingency which allows for connection and meaningful engagement between people. If we return briefly to the moment between Adrian and his mother, we can say that it is contingency itself that brings Adrian to tears when it is expressed by his mother in her phrase about her husband's condition: "It can't last, but it does, it does. It can't last, Adrian" (411). Tenderness is here the sense of impermanence and vulnerability expressed by this phrase. Moreover, this is a phrase which encompasses both novels and the various prospects of relationships, knowledges and emotions that are contained within them and that structure the world. Thus, it is a sense of the 'contingency of it all' that brings Adrian to tears, and with them, the tenderness between him and his mother. But tears need not always be the outcome of such tenderness, and though an awareness of contingency in

and of itself may seem to offer little hope to the postmodern subject, in the combination of the contingent purview with the pleasurably ironic forms of the 'little master' figures, we can see the mode of postmodern subjectivity that, for Wilkins, foregrounds a return to tender and empathetic relations.

In *The Miserables* this is made evident by what amounts to the 'trigger' for Healey of his understanding of context and tenderness when he meets the student from Czechoslovakia.[16] What follows can be read as a distillation of the contingent and ironic postmodern aesthetic of engagement and tenderness that both texts explore in their entirety. It is a moment when two individuals catch each other in the act, so to speak. The meeting takes place at a university in Mid-West America where both Healey and the Czechoslovakian have delivered seminars on their home countries. The conversation that occurs between them comes on the cusp of sensations that neither one has managed to convey the truth about their country and that neither has managed to come up with the final vocabulary by which their countries might objectively be known. Thus, it is with the sense of having made something up, of "concocting" something less than 'true' (a fiction maybe) that the Czechoslovak engages Healey. In short, we can say that this moment of connection (between the two students) is foregrounded by an awareness of the contingency of representation and the fictionality of description:

> 'Thank God, no one knows the difference, eh. If my father had been here. If my friends!'
> 'What' said Healey.
> 'I feel freedom', said the Czech. 'Making speeches -- I no longer hear what I am saying. Do you understand?'
> 'You're not used to it. Well, neither am I --'
> 'No. Yes, I am not used to it, so perhaps, you know, I make things sound ... If my friends are here they will correct me.'
> 'They have a different version, a different view.'
> 'Yes, yes! Mine is no good. You are right. Mine is only half, not even half.'
> 'Neither is mine', said Healey.
> 'Ah, but we shake hands! Half and half!' (235)

What we have here, then, is symbolic of a meeting of contingencies, governed by a "conspiratorial wink" that is tantamount to a sense of confession and an acknowledgment

---

[16]This meeting is significant for Healey and his recovery from aphasia since it is saturated with metonymy. We see this in the way Healey refers to the others as China or Czechoslovakia, as well as the notion of having to encapsulate, in speech, something of your home country. However, the most significant impression of metonymy that Healey seems to feel is expressed in the sense of "different versions" and incompletion and connection conducted on the basis of the most discrete and attenuative information; thus it is as "half and half" that the two characters meet somewhere in the mid-west.

of a performance. This wink is where the Czech "*give[s] himself away*"[17] and it is chiefly an ironic gesture comparable to what Eco refers to as the knowing that "she knows that he knows". What is also evident is a foregrounding of difference ("different version[s]") and contingency that, as I have previously suggested, is the basis for empathetic relation. Moreover, despite the contingency of the world, the untenability of the true or objective (the words elided by the Czech are likely to be "true" or "real"), people are still able to meet and exchange a knowingness of the world.

What is staged here is, in miniature, a representation of the aesthetic that structures Wilkins' fictional return to the consideration of postmodern tenderness: a meeting and connection based on an ironic and metafictional understanding and an acknowledgment of contingency and difference; the "different versions" we can also think of as fiction. That both novels finish with moments that celebrate the contingency of the world (as seen in the above example, and in *Little Masters*, as Adrian's mother's phrase about impermanence, as well as Nessie's performative bite) is significant of a transition from a fearful view of contingency to the view of contingency as something a little remarkable.

[17]Just as Healey hopes to earlier in the novel. p.193.

WORKS CONSULTED

Allan, Guy., Druett, Joan and Coffey, Anna. review of *The Idles* in *The New Zealand Herald* (July 24, 1993).

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies.* London: Paladin, 1973.

Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*

Bertens, Hans and Fokkema, Douwe. (eds.) *International Postmodernism, Theory and Literary Practice.* Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1997.

Birch, David. "Strategy and Contingency" in *From Text to Context.* Verdonk and Weber, 1995.

Bland, Peter. "New Poetry." review of *The Idles* in *Quote Unquote* (June 1993), pp.40-41.

Blundell, Sally. review of *Little Masters* in *The Press* (October 26, 1996), p.14.

Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Irony.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

Bowie, Malcom. *Lacan.* London: Fontana Press, 1991.

Bowron, Jane. "The Mentors." *Sunday Times* (October 1993), p.25.

Boyers, Robert. *Atrocity and Amnesia: The Political Novel since 1945.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.

Bruner, Jerome. *Acts of Meaning.* Cambridge; Massachusetts: Harvard University Press,1993.

Caffin, Elizabeth. review of *The Miserables* in *Landfall* 187 (Autumn 1994), pp.187-193.

Carroll, David. (Ed.) *The States of 'Theory': History, Art, and Critical Discourse.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.

Charman, Janet. review of *The Idles* in *Landfall* 186 (Spring 1993), pp.344-346.

Clendinnen, Inga. *Reading the Holocaust.* Melbourne, Australia: Text Publishing, 1998

Cooper, Rhonda. review of *The Idles* in *Metro* 146 (August 1993), pp.132-133.

- - - , "Nostalgic Journeys." review of *The Miserables* in *Metro* 152 (February 1994), pp.127-129.

- - - , "Surf's Up." review of *Little Masters* in *Metro* 180 (June 1996), pp109-111.

Cox, Nigel. "Getting Away From It All." *Quote Unquote* (June 1993), pp.11-13.

Culler, Jonathon. *Barthes.* Frank Kermode (ed.) Fontana, 1987.

Cunninghame, Pamela. "Part Talk Teasers." review of *The Veteran Perils* in *The New Zealand Herald* (September 8, 1990).

Daghistany, Ann. and Smitten, Jeffrey, R. *Spatial Form in Narrative.* Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1981.

Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle.* Detroit, Michigan: Black and Red, 1977.

De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Berkeley: University of California Press, c1984.

- - - , *The Writing of History.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Direen, Bill. "Other Parts." review of *The Idles* in *Listener* 140 (September 1993), p.43.

Docherty, Thomas. *After Theory, Post Modernism/Post Marxism.* London; New York: Routledge, 1990.

During, Simon. review of *The Veteran Perils* in *Landfall* 45 (June 1991), pp. 237-253.

Easthope, Anthony. *Literary into Cultural Studies.* London; New York: Routledge, 1991.

Easthope, Anthony and McGowan, Kate. (eds.) *Critical and Cultural Theory Reader.* Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992.

Eco, Umberto. *Reflections on The Name of the Rose.* London: Secker and Warburg, 1984.

Eco, Umberto. *The Limits of Interpretation.* Indiana University Press, 1990.

Eco, Umberto. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation.* Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Eggleton, David. "The Exuberance of Verbosity." review of *The Veteran Perils* in *The Evening Post* (July 28), p.31.

- - - , "Boxing the Compass." *New Zealand Books* (August 1996), pp.7-8.

Evans, Patrick. D. *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature.* Auckland, New Zealand: Penguin, 1990.

- - - , "Damien Wilkins's Therapeutic Journeys." unpublished article, University of Canterbury, 1998.

Federman, Raymond. (Ed.) *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow.* Chicago: The Swallow Press Inc., 1975.

Findley, Timothy. *Inside Memory: Pages from a Writer's Workbork.* Toronto: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990.

Gay, Peter. (ed.) *The Freud Reader.* Vintage, 1995.

Gass, William H. *Fiction and the Figures of Life.* New York: Knopf, 1970.

Gifkins, Michael. "Bookmarks: Storia Antipodies." *Listener* 126 (April 9, 1990), p.21.

Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature.* New York:

Routledge, 1991.

Hassan, Ihab. *The Postmodern Turn, Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture.* Ohio University State Press, 1987.

Heidenreich, Rosemarin. *The Postwar Novel in Canada: Narrative Patterns and Reader Response.* Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1989.

Hill, David. review of *The Miserables* in *The New Zealand Herald* (April 9, 1994).

- - - , review of *Little Masters* in *The New Zealand Herald* (April 6, 1996).

Honderich, Ted. (Ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy.* Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press,1995.

Hutcheon, Linda. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox.* Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1980.

Hutcheon, Linda. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony.* London; New York: Routledge, 1994.

Isaacs, Clarke. review of *Little Masters* in *The Otago Daily Times* (June 15, 1996), p 22.

James, Bryan., McEldowney, P.J and Newton, Gary. review of *The Idles* in *The Otago Daily Times* (July 10, 1993), p.20.

Jakobson, Roman. "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Linguistic Disturbances"
in Jakobosn and Halle, *Fundamentals of Language.* 2nd ed. The Hague: Mouton, 1971.

Jameson, Fredric. "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernsim Debate" in *New German Critique.* #33, Fall 1984. pp53-65.

- - - , "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in Hal Foster (ed.) *The Anti Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture.* 1st ed. Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983.

Jefferson, Ann. *The Nouveau Roman and the Poetics of Fiction.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

Jensen, Kai. *Whole Men: The Masculine Tradition in New Zealand Literature.* Auckland University Press, 1996.

Johnson, Stephanie. review of *The Miserables* in *More* (March 1994), p.136.

Jones, Lawrence. "Surprising Ourselves." *New Zealand Books* (October 1996), pp.5-6.

Kohut, Heinz, M.D. *Analysis of the Self. A Systematic Approach to the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders.* Madison; Connecticut: International Universities Press, Inc., 1971.

Klinkowitz, Jerome. *Structuring the Void: The Struggle for Subject in Contemporary American Fiction.* Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1992.

Klinkowitz, Jerome. *Literary Subversions: New American Fiction and the Practice of Criticism.* Carbondale; Eduardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985.

Kundera, Milan. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being.* London: Faber, 1984.

Kundera, Milan. *Life is Elsewhere.* London: Faber, 1986

Kundera, Milan. *The Art of the Novel.* New York: Grove Press, 1988.

Lacan, Jaques. *Ecrits; A Selection.* London: Tavistock Publications, 1977.

Lacapra, Dominick. *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language.* Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press,1983.

Landsberg, Alison. "Towards a Radical Politics of Empathy" in *New German Critique.* #71,Spring/Summer, 1997, pp63 - 86.

Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism: American life in an Age of Diminishing Expectation.* New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc., 1978.

Legat, Nicola. "The Next Wave." *North and South* (October 1996), pp.98-106.

Leggott, Michele. "Taking Off." review of *The Veteran Perils* in *Listener* 127 (August 27, 1990), p.109.

Lodge, David. *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature.* London: Edward Arnold, 1977.

- - - , *Modern Criticism and Theory.* London; New York: Longman, 1988.

Lucy, Niall. *Postmodern Literary Theory, an Introduction.* Malden Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

- - - , *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985.* (trans. and ed.) Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas, Sydney: Southend Press, Power Institute of Fine Arts, 1992.

Macpherson, Mary and Ferrall, Charles. review of *The Miserables* in *The Dominion* (December 18, 1993), p.14.

Maltby, Paul. *Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme, Coover and Pynchon.* University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991.

Manhire, Bill (Ed.). *Soho Square.* London: Bloomsbury, 1991.

Manhire, Bill (Ed.). *Mutes and Earthquakes: Bill Manhire's Creative Writing Course at Victoria.*Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1997.

Mason, Andrew. "Dream Run." review of *The Miserables* in *Quote Unquote* (January/February 1994).

McCabe, Colin Ed. *The Talking Cure: Essays in Psychoanalysis.* London: MacMillan, 1981.

McCaffery, Larry. *After Yesterday's Crash: The Avant-Pop Anthology.* New York: Penguin, 1995.

McGregor, Rod. "Composed of Small Moments." review of *The Miserables* in *New Zealand Books* (March 1994), pp8-9.

McHale, Brian. *Constructing Postmodernism.* London; New York: Routledge, 1992.

McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction.* New York: Methuen, 1987.

McLean, Gavin. "Earthly Stories." review of *The Veteran Perils* in Otago Daily Times (October 20, 1990), p.21.

Mcleod, Marion. "Other Lives." *Listener* 127 (August 27, 1990), p.109.

McNaughton, Iona. "Successful Experiments." *Dominion Sunday Times* (Januuary 7, 1990), p.12

McNeil, E. B. *The Psychoses.* New Jersey, Prentice-Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, 1970.

Moore, David. review of *Little Masters* in *JAAM* (Summer 1996/1997), pp.116-117.

Morrissey, Michael. "Dazzling Short Stories." review of *The Veteran Perils* in *The Press* (December 1, 1990), p.26.

- - - , review of *Little Masters* in *Sunday Star Times* (April 21, 1996).

- - - , review of *Little Masters* in *Quote Unquote* (May 1996), pp.27-28.

Neville, Rick., Gray Alison and Riach, Alan. review of *Little Masters* in *The Dominion* (April 27, 1996), p.20.

New, W. H. *Dreams of Speech and Violence: The Art of the Short Story in Canada and New Zealand.* Toronto; Buffalo; London: Universtity of Toronto Press, 1987.

Newton, John. review of *Little Masters* in *The Evening Post* (March 8, 1996), p.7.

- - - , review of *Little Masters* in *Landfall* 192 (Spring 1996), pp. 336-340.

Okrent, Mark, *Heidegger's Pragmatism.* Cornell University Press, 1988.

Price, Chris. "Vivid Pictures of the Ordinary." review of *The Idles* in *The Evening Post* (June 4, 1993), p.5

Quigley, Margaret., Hillary Naylor and Riddell, Oliver. review of *The Miserables* in *The Press* (January 15, 1994), p.10.

Richards, Ian. "Losing the Plot." review of *Little Masters* in *Listener* (March 30, 1996), p.42.

Rorty, Richard. *Philosphy and the Mirror of Nature.* Princeton; New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979.

Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity.* Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Salusinszky, Imre. *Gerald Murnane.* Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Salusinszky, Imre. "On Gerald Murnane, Crossing the Border" in *Meanjin,* vol 45 #4

December 1986, pp 518-529.

Salusinszky, Imre. "Murnane, Husserl, Derrida: The Scene of Writing" in *Australian Literary Studies.* Vol.14, #2: October 1989. pp.188-198.

Scholes, Robert. *Fabulation and Metafiction.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979.

Schwartz, Daniel. *The Case for a Humanistic Poetics.* London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1990.

Sharp, Iain. review of *The Veteran Perils* in *The Dominion Sunday Times* (July 29, 1990), p.31.

- - - , review of *The Miserables* in *The Evening Post* (November 19, 1993), p.9.

Siegel, Allen. M. *Heinz Kohut and the Psychology of the Self.* London; New York: Routledge. 1992.

Simpson, Peter. "Happy Ride." review of *The Miserables* in *Listener* 142 (Januaury 22, 1994).

Smyth, Edmund. (ed.) J. *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction.* London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1991.

Sontag, Susan. *A Barthes Reader.* New York: Hill and Wang, c1982.

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays.* New York: Farrar and Giroux, 1996.

Stafford, Jane. "Density Balanced with Insight." review of *The Veteran Perils* in the *Dominion* (July 28, 1990), p.9.

Sturm, Terry. (ed.) *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature.* Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Tanner, Tony. *City of Words: American Fiction 1950 - 1970.* Bedford Square, London: Jonathon Cape, 1971.

Thornton, Lawrence. *Unbodied Hope.* London; Toronto: Lewisburg Bucknell University Press, 1984.

Todd, William. L. *Analytical Solipsism.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968.

Verdonk, Peter and Weber, Jean Jaques (eds.) *Twentieth Century Fiction: From Text to Context.* London, Routledge, 1995.

Waugh, Patricia, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction.* London; New York, Methuen, 1984.

Waugh, Patricia. *Practising Postmodernism / Reading Modernism.* London: Edward Arnold, 1992.

Waugh, Patricia and Rice, Philip. (eds.) *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader.* 3rd ed. London: Edward Arnold, 1996.

Waugh, Patricia. *Postmodernism: A Reader.* London; New York: Edward Arnold, 1992.

Wedde, Ian. *Tendering.* Auckland University Press, 1988.

Wheeler, Kathleen. M. *Romanticism, Pragmatism and Deconstruction.* Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Publishers, 1993.

Wilkins, Damien. "Get Personal." review of *Villa Vittoria* by C. K. Stead in *Listener* (March 8, 1997), pp.50-51.

- - -, *Little Masters*, Victoria University Press (1996).

- - -, "Sleeping Arrangements." *Sport* 17 (Spring 1996), pp.21-25.

- - -, "The Shadows." *Metro* (April 1996), pp.100-104.

- - -, review of *Coming Home in the Dark* by Owen Marshall in *Landfall*191 (Autumn 1996), pp.136-139.

- - -, "Conversion." *Sport* 15 (October 1995), pp.28-36.

- - -, "My Africa." *Metro* (August 1995), pp112-115.

- - -, "A Sober, Serious Passion." *Listener* (April 15, 1995), pp.50-51.

- - -, "Cleared for Creation." review of *Memoirs of a Peon* by Frank Sargeson in *Listener* (January 14, 1995), pp.51-52.

- - -, *The Miserables.* Victoria University Press (1993).

- - -, *The Idles.* Victoria University Press (1993).

- - -, "Books in Brief." *Listener* (October 16, 1993), pp.52-53.

- - -, "Square Dance." *Landfall* 186 (Spring 1993), p. 255.

- - -, "The Self Loathing of a Stead Novel." review of *The End of The Century at The End of The World* by C.K.Stead in *New Zealand Books* (December 1992).

- - -, "Our Senior Writers Go Into Bat." review of *In the Same Room* edited by Elizabeth Alley and Mark Williams in *Dominion Sunday Times* (September 20, 1992), p.22.

- - -, "A Wide, Clear Window." *Sport* 7 (July 1991), pp.25- 41.

- - -, "Orders." *Soho Square Four* (1991), pp.144-156.

- - -, *The Veteran Perils.* Victoria University Press (1990).

- - -, "The Television of The Future." *Metro* (June 1990), pp.122-127.

- - -, "The Pool Business." *Listener* (February 12, 1990), pp.107-110.

- - -, "Getting and Going." review of *The Amphibians* by Michael Gifkins in *Listener* (December 11, 1989), pp123-124.

- - -, "Total Football." *Landfall* 43 (December 1989), pp.476-482.

- - -, "Welcome Record of a Rare Writing Talent." review of *The Divided World* by Owen Marshall in the *Evening Post* (October 28, 1989), p.31.

- - -, "Northland Panels." review of *Diesel Mystic* by Gregory O'Brien in

Listener (September 2, 1989), pp.48-49.

- - - ,"Pace and Story Make For Strong Debut Collection." review of *Visitors* by John Cranna in the *Evening Post* (May 20, 1989), p.31.

- - - , "Memory on the Move." review of *Rainshadow* by Michael Jackson in *Listener* (February 11, 1989).

- - - , "Engine Country." *Sport* 1 (Spring 1988), pp.14-23.

- - - , "Making the Govenor." *Untold* (1988), pp60-65.

Williams, Mark and Leggott, Michelle (eds.) *Opening the Book: New Essays on New Zealand Writing.* Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University Press, 1995.

Wood, David, (ed.) *Derrida: A Critical Reader.* Blackwell, 1992.